

Introducing Yourself: *The Ideal Cover Letter*

What is a cover letter?

The cover letter is addressed to a potential employer (or internship sponsor) and serves as an introduction to you and your resume. In brief, it conveys the position for which you are applying, your interest in and qualifications for this position, and what next steps you hope to accomplish in the employment process (obtaining an interview, etc.). If you write this letter well, you will kindle the employer's interest in you.

Why is a cover letter important?

Many employers say that the cover letter can be the key to securing an interview. Why? It provides you an opportunity to emphasize your qualification for a specific employer and position. Whereas your resume includes the range of your previous experiences, your cover letter can highlight and detail specific relevant experiences. Through a cover letter, you can also explain why the employer should want you – your enthusiasm for the position, your knowledge of the organization, your plans to pursue a relevant course or work experience prior to working for them, your understanding of the skills/experiences they seek, your strong communication skills, etc.

What to do before you start writing?

- ✓ **Obtain a description of the position.** Visit the organization's web page to learn more about the position and organization. Read any material you have about the organization. Contact the organization for a job description.
- ✓ **Do more research on the position and the organization.** Call/write the organization for additional literature: brochures, annual reports, other company literature, and recent press releases. Talk with anyone you already know at the organization about it. Set up an informational interview with someone at the organization or at a similar organization to learn more about it. Sewanee alumni can help!
- ✓ **Identify and address your cover letter to the correct person.** If a name is not on the material you have, call the organization and ask to whom you should send your letter. (Being very polite to receptionists can really pay off!) If no specific person can be identified, it is best to find the name of the person who would be managing your position, rather than a name in the Human Resources office. The manager can forward your letter to the Human Resources office, if appropriate, and that way Human Resources will not screen out your application before it reaches the manager. Many experts suggest that it doesn't hurt to write to someone higher up in the company. An upper level manager will send your letter on to the appropriate person, and your letter may receive more attention if it is forwarded from a superior. Whatever the contact name, be sure to ask for the spelling of the person's name, even if it sounds obvious. "Joe Smith" might really be "Mr. Joe Smyth" or "Ms. Jo Smith." Confirm the address, and get a phone number for this person. If you don't have a phone number for the organization, look it up in the yellow pages or on the internet, or call directory assistance. *** Note: in some cases, it really will be impossible to find the name of the person. ***

- ✓ **Identify what aspects of the position/organization really interest you.** What makes you enthusiastic about this opportunity?
- ✓ **Identify what you have to offer this organization.** Think back over your own experiences. Look at your resume. Look at the information about the company position. What are experiences or skills that you have that would be a good match for this organization or position? If you do not have any directly relevant experiences/skills, do you have experiences/skills that would be transferable? Don't forget to consider extracurricular, volunteer, or any classroom experiences. For example, if you have not had any experience managing people in the workplace, did you act as the leader in a class project? If you have never taught children in a classroom, did you ever lead a scout troop or tutor your classmates?
- ✓ **Make plans to call the person to whom you are writing after you have sent the letter.** It can't hurt to be brave! Waiting for the phone to ring or a letter to arrive is time consuming, frustrating, and can keep you from pursuing other opportunities. Calling also shows that employer that you are truly interested! If you are sending out a lot of cover letters, you may want to write that you will call only for the ones that interest you the most. However, if you later do find the time, you can still call all 50, regardless of whether you told them you would or not.

A Sample Format For a Cover Letter

(1" or more from the top of the page)

Your Name
Your Street Address
City, State, and Zip Code
Date of Letter

(leave 3 lines blank)

Mr./Ms./Dr. First and Last Name
Position Title
Name of Business or Organization
Street Address
City, State, and Zip Code

(leave 1 line blank)

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. Last Name

(leave 1 line blank)

Why are you writing? Introduce yourself and why you are writing in a way that captures the employer's attention. Name the position or type of work (teaching what subjects, working in which department) for which you are applying and mention how you heard of the opening or organization. If you don't know the position or type of work, it's time to do some research! If someone connected to the organization has referred you to this position/organization, be sure to mention that: "Your colleague, Don Jameson, suggested that I contact you about (the position)." Keep this paragraph short, hard-hitting, and enthusiastic.

Why are you right for this position? Sell the organization on what you can contribute. Pick one or two most relevant highlights from your resume to demonstrate our strongest skills, experiences, and personal qualities. Concentrate on what you know the organization seeks. Do not reiterate your entire resume. Focus on the organization's need, not yours.

Why this company? Describe why you are interested in working in this industry and for this organization. Indicate how your experiences have helped formulate your career goals and how your skills and interests might grow and develop with the organization. Be as specific as possible, subtly emphasizing your knowledge about this organization (here is where research helps!) and the industry. *** Caution: your focus should not be on what the employer can do for you. For example, do not say that the job will prepare you well for business school. ***

Action oriented conclusion: Request and interview. Note when you'll be available for an interview, as well as employment. Unless the job posting requests "no calls," tell the reader that you will call on a certain date to discuss your application or to request an interview at a mutually convenient time. Invite the reader to contact you beforehand and include your phone number. Thank the person to whom you are writing for considering your application.

(leave 1 line blank)

Sincerely,

(leave 3 lines blank)

(Sign here in ink)

Your Name

Enclosure

(This indicates that you are enclosing a resume, application, or other document)

Important Hints for Best Results

- Never “mass produce” a cover letter. Instead, you should individually tailor the letter to a specific employer. Once you get one cover letter completed, though, you will probably be able to use it as a template for your other cover letters and tweak specific segments of the letter for specific employers.
- Your opening sentence is key to gaining the attention of the reader.
- Address your letter to the correct person using correct spelling. If you do not have a name, do some sleuthing to find out – it will pay off! A “To whom it may concern” letter may get lost and is impersonal. Similarly, a letter with the person’s name misspelled is a turn-off. (See page 1 for some hints on finding this right person)
- Write your letter in a confident, enthusiastic, persuasive manner.
- Use good grammar, spelling, and style. Be personal, but not informal (no contractions, no slang). This is an employer’s first impression of you. The reader will view your letter as an example of your writing skills.
- Avoid excessive use of “I,” “me,” and “my,” especially at the beginning of sentences.
- Be positive about your own skills. Don’t say, “Although I haven’t have much experience in ...” Instead, highlight the experience that you have had, or describe other ways in which you have used/showcased/gained your skills. Cut phrases such as “I feel” or “I believe” completely and replace them with “I am confident” or “I am convinced.”
- Use active, strong verbs. Rather than saying, “I was given the responsibility of supervising fifteen campers,” say “I supervised fifteen campers.” (See page 7 for a list of power words)
- Don’t list only general personal qualifications, such as “I am organized and team player.” If these are important to the employer, back them up with evidence. For example: “Having juggled the demands of a double major as well as several extracurricular activities, I have developed strong time management skills.” or “My previous employer especially complimented my strong organizational and teamwork skills.”
- Keep this letter short and tightly written. Cut extraneous words, change “in order to” and “for the purpose of” to “to.” While you want to convey as much key information as possible, few recruiters will read a cover letter longer than one page.
- Proofread carefully. Ask someone else to proofread it as well. Don’t rely solely on computer spell-checks. They won’t catch homonyms or some other words that you didn’t intend to use (e.g. “their” vs. “there,” “to” vs. “top”).

- Read your letter aloud. Does it read easily? Listen for any awkward or overly complex sentences as well those that don't really say much.
- Read your letter from the employer's point of view. How would you react? If time permits, put the letter away and look at it again the next day.
- Print your letter on a high-quality printer, using paper that matches your resume. Resume paper is bond paper that is of a heavier weight than copy paper. It often has a watermark and is 100% cotton. You can purchase it at the bookstore, Print Services, or other office supply stores.
- Send your resume and cover letter in a neat, professional looking envelope. (You can buy envelopes that match your cover letter and resume) Many people like to use 9" x 12" envelopes to avoid folding the paper. Don't forget that these require extra postage! Type the person's name, position title, and address, and be sure to include a return address.
- After you send the letter, follow up with the employer, ESPECIALLY if you wrote that you would. Even if they love you on paper, they may not have time to call. They could also be missing a piece of your application that you don't know about, and have no time to call you. By calling, you show your enthusiasm and improve your chances of getting the position.
- RELAX! This is only a single page letter. The tips listed here are not meant to be intimidating; they are intended to help you write a great letter!

Other Business Correspondence

Informational interview request:

While similar to a cover letter, your purpose is to ask for the opportunity to meet with a person rather than interview for a job. Informational interviews are helpful to develop contacts in an industry, as well as gain information about an industry or organization. For samples of these letters, as well as tips on the informational interview process, please see the Office of Career Services packet, *Getting a Foot in the Door: Informational Interviews and Networking*.

Thank-you letter:

After you have had an interview (or in some cases, a phone conversation) with an employer, you will want to write a thank-you letter. For samples of these letters, please see the Office of Career Services packet, *Thriving in the Spotlight: The Interview*.

POWER WORDS

VERBS

- Accept
- Acclaim
- Accommodate
- Accomplish
- Accredited
- Accumulate
- Achieve
- Acknowledge
- Acquire
- Act
- Activate
- Adapt
- Address
- Adopt
- Advance
- Advertise
- Advise
- Affirm
- Align
- Amount
- Analyze
- Announce
- Anticipate
- Appeal
- Appear
- Applaud
- Apply
- Appoint
- Appraise
- Appreciate
- Approach
- Appropriate
- Approve
- Approximate
- Arise
- Archive
- Arrange
- Array
- Ask
- Aspire
- Assemble
- Assign
- Assimilate
- Assist
- Associate
- Assume
- Assure
- Astonish
- Attach
- Attend
- Attract
- Audit
- Augment
- Author
- Authorize
- Automate
- Award
- Balance
- Beat
- Believe
- Blend
- Blitz
- Bonus
- Book
- Brand
- Broaden
- Budget
- Build
- Buy
- Calculate
- Cancel
- Capsulate
- Centralize
- Cause
- Champion
- Change
- Clarify
- Classify
- Close
- Code
- Coincide
- Collect
- Combine
- Commiserate
- Commission
- Commit
- Communicate
- Compensate
- Compete
- Compile
- Complete
- Comply
- Compose
- Compound
- Comprehend
- Comprise
- Conceive
- Conceptualize
- Conclude
- Concur
- Conduct
- Conjoin
- Connect
- Consider
- Consolidate
- Construct
- Consult
- Contact
- Contain
- Contribute
- Convene
- Control
- Convert
- Convey
- Correspond
- Counsel
- Cover
- Create
- Credit
- Critique
- Cultivate
- Customize
- Decentralize
- Decide
- Declare
- Decline
- Defend
- Define
- Delegate
- Delete
- Deliver
- Demand
- Demonstrate
- Deny
- Deposit
- Depreciate
- Derail
- Derive
- Descend
- Describe
- Design
- Designate
- Desist
- Detail
- Detect
- Deter
- Determine
- Develop
- Devise
- Diagnose
- Dictate
- Differentiate

- Articulate
- Ascend
- Characterize
- Charter
- Cooperate
- Coordinate
- Diffuse
- Diminish
- Disclose
- Discover
- Discuss
- Dispose
- Dispute
- Dissolve
- Distinguish
- Distribute
- Divert
- Divide
- Document
- Draft
- Drive
- Duplicate
- Earn
- Edit
- Effect
- Elevate
- Eliminate
- Embellish
- Embrace
- Emerge
- Empathize
- Emphasize
- Employ
- Empower
- Enclose
- Encompass
- Encounter
- Encourage
- Endorse
- Enforce
- Engage
- Engender
- Enhance
- Enlarge
- Enlighten
- Ensure
- Entertain
- Entrust
- Envision
- Estimate
- Evacuate
- Examine
- Exceed
- Excel
- Exclude
- Execute
- Exemplify
- Exhaust
- Exhibit
- Expand
- Expect
- Expedite
- Expense
- Experiment
- Explain
- Explode
- Explore
- Expound
- Express
- Extend
- Extract
- Exude
- Fabricate
- Facilitate
- Fashion
- Feature
- Feel
- Field
- Fight
- Finalize
- Finance
- Finish
- Finesse
- Focus
- Follow
- Force
- Forecast
- Forfeit
- Forge
- Form
- Format
- Formulate
- Frame
- Franchise
- Frequent
- Fuel
- Fulfill
- Furnish
- Gain
- Garner
- Garnish
- Gather
- Generalize
- Generate
- Give
- Globalize
- Glorify
- Graduate
- Grasp
- Group
- Grow
- Guide
- Handle
- Harbor
- Heal
- Heighten
- Help
- Highlight
- Hire
- Hold
- Honor
- Identify
- Illustrate
- Imagine
- Imitate
- Implement
- Imply
- Import
- Improve
- Incept
- Incite
- Include
- Increase
- Indicate
- Infer
- Initialize
- Initiate
- Inject
- Inspire
- Install
- Instigate
- Institute
- Integrate
- Intend
- Intensify
- Interact
- Intercede
- Interface
- Interfere
- Interpret
- Intertwine
- Intervene
- Interview
- Introduce
- Invent
- Inventory
- Invert
- Invest
- Investigate
- Invoice
- Involve
- Isolate
- Itemize
- Join
- Judge
- Justify
- Know
- Label
- Launch
- Lead
- Lease
- Liaise
- List
- Loan
- Look
- Magnify
- Maintain
- Manage

- Equip
- Escalate
- Establish

- Measure
- Monitor
- Motivate
- Negotiate
- Observe
- Obtain
- Operate
- Order
- Organize
- Originate
- Oversee
- Participate
- Performed
- Persuade
- Plan
- Prepare
- Present
- Prioritize
- Process
- Produce
- Program
- Project
- Promote
- Provide
- Publicize
- Publish

- Foster
- Found
- Fragment

- Purchase
- Rate
- Recommend
- Reconcile
- Record
- Recruit
- Reduce
- Refer
- Regulate
- Rehabilitate
- Remodel
- Reorganize
- Repair
- Report
- Represent
- Reproduce
- Research
- Restore
- Restructure
- Retrieve
- Review
- Revitalize
- Save
- Schedule
- School
- Screen

- Influence
- Inform
- Infuse

- Select
- Serve
- Set
- Simplify
- Sold
- Solicit
- Solidify
- Solve
- Specify
- Stimulate
- Streamline
- Strengthen
- Structure
- Study
- Summarize
- Surpass
- Supervise
- Survey
- Synergize
- Synthesize
- Systemize
- Tabulate
- Taught
- Target
- Test
- Trace

- Mandate
- Market
- Master

- Track
- Train
- Transcribe
- Translate
- Travel
- Tutor
- Trim
- Tweak
- Update
- Upgrade
- Uphold
- Upkeep
- Urge
- Use
- Utilize
- Validate
- Vend
- Verity
- View
- Visualize
- Voice
- Volunteer
- Vote
- Withstand
- Worked
- Write