



## UNDERGRADUATE COVER LETTER WRITING GUIDE

### What is the Purpose of a Cover Letter?

Your cover letter is an opportunity to sell yourself to a potential employer by highlighting the skills, experiences, and qualities that make you a strong fit for that company and position. Use it to demonstrate your value to the employer and the impact you will have on the organization if hired. The cover letter should describe how you can contribute to the organization, NOT what the position can do for you!

While your resume is one important tool in your job search, do not underestimate the power of the cover letter. Often, the cover letter is an employer's first impression of you, so make sure that it's strong and compelling to increase the probability that the employer will read your resume. After all, its overall purpose is to motivate the employer to *want* to read your resume and move you forward in the hiring process.

*You will write a unique, tailored cover letter for each position to which you apply.*

### 4 Steps to Writing a Compelling Cover Letter

#### **1. Before writing your cover letter, research the company.**

What are its mission and values? What clients does the organization serve? What challenges does it face? What are the company's goals? A complete understanding of the organization will allow you to position yourself as someone who will contribute to its success.

#### **2. Use the job description as a guide.**

Closely review sections such as "Desired Qualifications" and "Job Responsibilities." What keywords are used? What specific skills are being sought? What capabilities are necessary in order to be successful in the position? Your cover letter should be written through the eyes of the recruiter – if you were hiring for that position, what would convince you that someone is an ideal candidate?

#### **3. Align your skills and experiences with the job description.**

For each component of the job description, ask yourself, "What have I done that demonstrates I possess this skill, experience, or quality?" Previous internships, leadership positions, course projects, volunteer work, part-time jobs, and independent or entrepreneurial activities can all be used to highlight your value to the organization.

#### **4. Follow the FDFCC format guide (page 3) to structure your cover letter.**

Once you have determined what an ideal candidate would look like, as well as specific examples from your experience that you can share to sell yourself as that ideal candidate, it's time to write your cover letter. Use the professional format and section-by-section details on the last page of this guide.



## Cover Letter Essentials

**Focus on the Company's Needs.** A common mistake is focusing on what you hope to gain out of the experience instead of what you will bring to the organization. Employers are interested in how you will help their company achieve its goals, not how their internship or job will help you achieve yours.

**Tailor it to the Position.** Express why you are writing the letter (i.e. to apply for a specific opening/job), what excites you about the company/position (be specific and tie this back into your experience), and related accomplishments from your education and experience that make you a strong fit for the organization/position.

**Personalize Contact Information.** Address your cover letter to someone specific whenever possible. If the position description does not include a specific contact name, call the company and ask to whom you should address your application (unless the posting states “no calls”), or research the appropriate contact on the company/department website. If you still do not have a contact name, “Dear Hiring Manager:” may be used. DO NOT address your cover letter “Dear Sir or Madam” or “To Whom it May Concern.”

**Name Drop (if Appropriate).** Did you learn about the opportunity through a mutual contact, speak with an alum about the organization, or meet a recruiter at an information session? Mention their name and the conversation in your cover letter, but DO NOT exaggerate the relationship.

**Keep it Concise.** Focus only on the skills and experiences that are most relevant to the position. One page maximum and leave plenty of white space. Do not discourage the employer from reading your cover letter because it is too long, too “text-heavy,” or includes irrelevant information.

**Use Keywords.** Incorporate exact wording from the position description into your cover letter – don’t make the recruiter guess whether “managed finances” is the same thing as “allocated funds.”

**Proofread.** And then proofread again. Use spell/grammar check, but remember that these tools are not foolproof. Have several people review your cover letter to ensure that there are no spelling or grammatical errors you may have overlooked.

**Take the Initiative.** Unless an employer specifically requests that you do not send a cover letter, ALWAYS include one, even if it is not required. Taking the time to write a cover letter demonstrates your genuine interest in the position and gives you the opportunity to expand on the most relevant information from your resume.



**IMA STUDENT**

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Use your resume's letterhead for a consistent look.

DATE

Ms. / Mr. First and Last Name  
Title  
Company  
Street  
City, State ZIP

Always address your cover letter to a specific person. See Page 2 of this guide for help.

Dear Ms. / Mr. Last Name:

Extra Tip: Begin with a catchy opener that will grab the employer's attention. Instead of "My name is \_\_\_ and I'm applying for \_\_\_", highlight a specific skill or experience that will lead you to succeed in the position. The first line of your cover letter should make you stand out from other applicants and encourage the employer to read on.

**Paragraph #1 – INTRO**

State the position for which you are applying, or if you are not applying to a specific position, your areas of interest within the organization. If you learned about the position/company through a personal connection (ex: speaking with a recruiter at an information session vs. viewing a posting on GWorkSB), include that information as well.

If you know or have spoken with someone at the organization (ex: GWSB alum, guest speaker in one of your classes, family friend), mention the person's name and the conversation, but DO NOT exaggerate the relationship. If you are writing to someone you already know, remind him or her of how you know each other.

Describe why you are interested in this company/position, but do not simply cut and paste a blurb from the website. Be specific and tie your interest back to your experience (ex: a company initiative that is related to work you do with a student organization). Demonstrate that you have researched the company, but be sincere and genuine in your interest.

**Paragraph #2 – YOUR RELEVANT EXPERIENCE**

Describe your skills, experiences, and accomplishments that are unique and important requirements for the position. This may include work experience, internships, campus leadership positions, course projects, volunteer experience, or entrepreneurial activities. Give specific examples and go into detail about the skills you used and what you accomplished in these roles. Do not mention everything on your resume – use the position description as a guide to determine which of your experiences are the most relevant. Remember, the purpose of the cover letter is not to tell your life story, but to demonstrate how you will help the organization reach its goals through your specific and relevant skills and past accomplishments.

You can divide this section into two paragraphs if you have a great deal of relevant experience, but make sure that the MOST relevant experience appears first. You can also use bullet points to emphasize your relevant qualifications in this section, but do not copy/paste from your resume.

**Paragraph #3 – CLOSING**

Briefly summarize your qualifications for the "final sell." State that you are very interested in the organization and would appreciate the opportunity to interview for the position. Thank them for their time and consideration. State that you look forward to hearing back.

Sincerely,

Your First and Last Name