



Cover Letter Guide

Four Steps to Mastering the Cover Letter Process

What is a Cover Letter?

A cover letter is a one-page persuasive document that explains how you would fit in and contribute to the success of a particular organization. The cover letter is your first impression to an employer. The reader should understand why you are enthusiastic about the position and what knowledge, skills, and personality traits you would bring. It is also an example of your writing abilities, so proper grammar, formatting, and proofreading are critical.

1. The Basics

Do I Need Both a Cover Letter and a Resume?

- Yes. A cover letter accompanies your resume when you submit an application for a position.
- The cover letter tells a story: who you are, why you're interested in the position, and what you've gained from your experiences that you will bring to the organization. Your resume supports that story by providing additional facts and evidence for the claims you make in your cover letter.
- In talking about your experiences, do not use word-for-word descriptions from your resume. Focus instead on illustrating how your experiences demonstrate the particular skills and qualifications of the job.
- **Warning: Be very careful about copy and pasting text from one cover letter to the next.** Although some descriptions, such as details on leadership experiences and extracurriculars, are transferable, make sure that your letter remains tailored to the individual organization and job description.

Formatting, Language, and Style

- A cover letter is professional correspondence. A properly formatted cover letter shows employers that you understand and can follow standard business conventions.
- Your cover letter should be no more than **one page long**.
- Use clear, direct language and specific examples. The strongest cover letters **show, not tell**.
- Strike the right tone: be confident, but not boastful. It is important to highlight what an organization will get when they hire you, **NOT** how an organization can help you achieve your personal ambitions.
- Avoid exclamation points, exaggerations, clichés, and abbreviations (unless previously spelled out).
- Eliminate typographical errors. Remember that spell check software does not catch grammar mistakes.

Overused/Clichéd Words and Phrases to Avoid:

offer
 I am drawn to
 furthermore
 perfect fit
 extremely
 I would love to
 invaluable

Standing Out

Remember, the best cover letters are individual and cannot be adapted from a guide. You must identify your specific reasons for applying for each position and be clear about what makes you different from other applicants. It is your job to showcase what you can bring to an employer, and it is the employer's job to decide if you are the best candidate for the position.

2. Knowing the Job

The Job Description

- Your first task is to thoroughly read the job description and highlight the key requirements that you will address in your letter. A strong cover letter clearly refers to the listed qualifications and emphasizes the ways in which you meet them.

Background Research

- After reviewing the job description, it is critical that you do some additional organizational research. This information can be woven into the opening and closing paragraphs of your cover letter (*see 3. Cover Letter Structure*) to demonstrate that you are truly interested in the organization. Some places to start include:
 - **Read the Mission Statement or About Us:** A mission statement or About Us page provides basic information about what an organization does and often gives a glimpse into its core values and goals. These are great details to mention when explaining what draws you to a particular organization.
 - **Review Recent Organizational News:** Check out the organization's social media, the news page on its website, or secondary news articles for updates on an organization's recent activity. Showing that you are up to date with an organization and its current projects differentiates your level of interest from other applicants.
 - **Groups within Larger Organizations:** If you are applying to a group within a larger organization (e.g. a lab or company department), focus your research efforts on learning more about its specific work and goals rather than researching the general organization.

Networking

- Talking to someone at the organization and referring to this conversation in your cover letter can really differentiate your application.
- **Don't be afraid to take the initiative.** If you do not have personal connections, search the organization on BCAN to get a list of Bowdoin alumni working there. Another option is using LinkedIn to reach out to current employees.

3. Cover Letter Structure

The following are recommendations for cover letter structure. Feel free to adapt your letter to your own style.

Letterhead

- Place the letterhead from your resume, including name, address, and contact information, horizontally across the top.

Employer Contact Information

- Employer contact information, as well as the date, sits below your letterhead. Whenever possible, direct your letter to a specific person. You may need to make a phone call to identify the appropriate individual. Use LinkedIn, the company website, and Google to do your best to figure out who should receive your letter. If you can't figure it out despite your best efforts, you may address it to a role (e.g. "Dear Hiring Manager" or "Dear Internship Coordinator").

Opening Paragraph

- Before you begin, ask yourself – why do you want this job? This is an important early step, because if you are not truly interested in the organization, it's likely that the employer will detect a lack of sincerity in your cover letter.
- Your first sentence should indicate your reason for writing by stating the position title for which you are applying.
- The rest of the first paragraph should focus on answering the following questions: Why do you want this position? Why do you want to work for this particular organization? This is a good place to incorporate your research from *2. Knowing the Job*.
- Be sure to mention if you have talked to someone at the organization in this paragraph.

Second Paragraph

- Match your employment skills to the job description. Describe specific examples of past work experiences that you've had and clearly connect these experiences to the position requirements. This will indicate that you have the skills and qualifications necessary for the job. **Remember: show, don't tell.**

Third Paragraph

- Highlight additional skills and/or personal traits that qualify you for the job. What else will the employer get if they hire you? This is where you can discuss experience related to your coursework, athletics, extracurricular activities, and volunteer service. You can also highlight personal qualities in this section, but it is important to substantiate them by discussing specific experiences in which you demonstrated or refined those traits. **Remember: show, don't tell.**

Closing Paragraph

- Leave your reader with a final statement of your interest in the position and/or organization. This is another good place to incorporate your research from 2. *Knowing the Job*.
- Identify the next step you will take and convey your eagerness to set up an interview. Thank the addressee for their time and consideration. You may wish to mention that you will call within a specified time in the hope of arranging a meeting. If you already have plans to travel to the area, indicate the dates you will be available.

Signature

- When submitting your letter electronically, you have several options for the signature: your name in a script font, your name preceded by /s/ to indicate an electronic signature, or a scanned image of your signature inserted as a small picture in the signature space. All are acceptable conventions.

4. Next Steps

Review Your Cover Letter

- Consider making an appointment with a Writing Assistant at the Bowdoin Writing Project to review an early draft of your cover letter. Visit bowdoin.edu/writing-project/conferences to schedule.
- Once you have completed a solid draft, please make an appointment to review your cover letter with a career advisor. To schedule a time, call us at 207-725-3717 or use our online form careerplanning.bowdoin.edu/appointment-request

Electronic Submission

- Most employers prefer the .pdf format for resumes and cover letters. A .pdf ensures that your document will appear the way you formatted it. Unless otherwise specified, submit your documents as a .pdf.
- Double check your letter after you convert it from Word to .pdf. Occasionally there are glitches in the conversion, so make sure that the finished product is error free.
- It's always a good idea to include a cover letter explaining your interest in a position. If you can include only one attachment, consider making a single two-page document that consists of your resume and your cover letter.

Following Up

- You show initiative, confidence, and motivation when you call or email an employer to follow up. We recommend that you follow up with the employer as early as a few days to two weeks after you send your letter, unless the job posting says "no phone calls or emails."
- When you reach out, you should express your continued interest in the position, ask if they have a complete copy of your application, and ask about the time frame for the review of applications.

Sample Cover Letter

See next page for a sample cover letter. For more examples, visit our website careerplanning.bowdoin.edu/coverletter.

Sample Cover Letter

RILEY CARTER

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February 15, 2016

Hal Nickerson, Program Associate
William Westlake Foundation
890 Borderland Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 09876

Dear Mr. Nickerson,

I am a rising senior at Bowdoin College, and I am writing to apply for the intern position at the William Westlake Foundation. I am inspired by the foundation's commitment to building a sustainable local food system in California, and I believe my research and work experience with a focus on food and farming would make me an asset to the foundation's team.

Last summer, Bowdoin's Economics Department awarded me the Clarkson Research Fellowship, an opportunity that allowed me to design and conduct a two-month research project exploring the economic benefits of growing local food networks in Southern Florida, my home region. During the course of the project, I honed my skills as both a qualitative and quantitative researcher by holding in-depth interviews with local grocers and examining the financial statements of various farmers' market vendors. I then analyzed my data during a semester-long independent study that culminated in a presentation of my findings to the Economics Department and a research paper that I am currently revising for submission to economic journals.

Beyond my deep interest and research experience in sustainable local food systems, I would bring the William Westlake Foundation my professional background in local food system work. As a summer intern at Hillside Farms, a nonprofit organization committed to agricultural education and small farm preservation in Louisiana, I taught basic farming skills, designed lessons on food source awareness, and partnered with a local food bank to provide fresh produce to those without access. My experience with Hillside Farms led me to volunteer with the Planter Project, a food access program that facilitates the planting of community gardens in underserved areas of Louisiana. As a volunteer, I fielded questions during site visits, monitored the status of garden development, and assisted with harvesting. Through both of these experiences, I have gained hands-on experience in advancing local food systems, and I feel compelled to continue doing similar work with the William Westlake Foundation.

I share in the William Westlake Foundation's vision for strengthening the production and consumption of locally sourced food, and I would consider it a privilege to contribute to your work in California. Thank you for considering my application.

Sincerely,

Riley Carter

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