

# COVER LETTER BASICS<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

The resume is ALMOST NEVER sent to a prospective employer without an accompanying cover letter. The cover letter should complement, not duplicate, resume information and focus the prospective employer's attention to pertinent areas of experience. In the cover letter, you get a chance to draw connections between your experience and the requirements described in the listing, linking concrete items from your resume with broader ideas and skill areas. It is a key measure of your writing skills, ability to articulate your qualifications for the intended position, and familiarity of the agency's needs.

**Cover letters should not exceed one page.** A concise letter demonstrates your focus on the position at hand as well as your ability to communicate succinctly.

## PREPARING AN EFFECTIVE COVER LETTER

### Step 1: Highlight Key Accomplishments from Your Resume

- DO NOT simply restate the information on your resume. Instead, highlight particular accomplishments, skills, and characteristics that are of special interest to the employer. Illustrate that you have the skills, knowledge, and experience that the employer seeks.
- If you are transitioning to a new field, this is also an opportunity to highlight your transferable skills. Consider your accomplishments across various settings—academic, personal, professional, and extracurricular.

### Step 2: Market Research

- Employers are seeking employees who fit their organization and culture well, and who can express an understanding of how their agency is part of a larger organizational structure or community. Your letter should demonstrate a thorough understanding of the position and needs of the employer, including the organization's mission.

### Step 3: Analyzing the Job Description

- Employers usually enumerate qualifications in order of importance. Use the information listed under “responsibilities & qualifications” in the job description to guide the theme(s) of your cover letter.
- Identify key verbs, skills, etc. and replicate the language in your cover letter.

## COVER LETTER STRUCTURE

- Use basic business-letter format in composing your letter (See sample letter.)

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<sup>1</sup> References material from both Letters & Science Career Services “Cover Letter Basics” handout and Harris School “Cover Letters” handout.

- The cover letter is ALWAYS tailored to a specific person/organization. Avoid using the generic “To Whom It May Concern.” If the name of the contact person is not given in the job listing (or if you are sending an “unsolicited” letter of inquiry), here are strategies for finding a name of an appropriate individual:
  - Go online and search the agency’s website (or LinkedIn group)
  - Call the agency directly and ask for a contact person.
  - Check on BuckyNet in “Employers” section for contact information for agencies who recruit through this office.
  - Really cannot find any name to whom to address it? Use “Dear Hiring Manager”:
- There are four basic sections in a cover letter:
  - *The opening paragraph*: This paragraph should only be 2-3 sentences long, but should capture employers’ interest and let them know why you are writing the letter.
    - State the exact position that you are interested in.
    - Describe your academic and top professional qualifications (e.g., degree level and major if relevant).
    - Explain how you learned of the position or organization (e.g., a personal referral, posting on company website, etc.).
    - Explain why you are specifically interested in this position and organization.
  - *Your skills & experience*: This is where you convince employers that you would be an asset to their organization and answer the question, “Why should we hire you?”
    - Relate your qualifications (specific examples from your education, work experience, and additional skills) to the specific job requirements and type of organization.
      - How did you develop the relevant skills/attributes required for the position?
      - How have you been successful in achieving your goals?
    - Use the vocabulary of the job description as much as possible to tailor your experiences to the employer’s needs.
    - Justify the employer’s interest in you—what makes you specifically suited for the position? What makes you unique or more valuable than other candidates?
    - Let your personality come through—why are you excited about the position or organization?
    - DO NOT simply repeat, word-for-word what is already on your resume; instead make associations and draw your experience and qualifications together. Additionally, avoid having pertinent information in your cover letter that is not backed up by your resume.
  - *Demonstrate employer knowledge*: Discuss why this specific job, employer, industry, or organization appeals to you.

- You need to do some basic research on the industry, organization, and position. This paragraph is an opportunity to show the employer that you have gone the extra mile to gain information.
- Employers reading your letter want to know you respect and like their organization. Discuss things that you have discovered that genuinely impress you.
- This is also an opportunity to discuss how your career interests and experiences fit their organizational philosophy.
  - What is it about the nature of the work that you find appealing?
  - Why are you committed to the employer’s mission?
- *The closing:*
  - Use the closing paragraph to indicate your interest in discussing the position and to request an interview at the prospective employer's convenience.
  - Give your phone number and email address where you can be reached.
  - If the prospective employer is not located in the applicant's immediate geographical area, it is to your advantage to mention if you will be in that general area at a particular time. You may also mention if you are willing to relocate or already plan on moving to that area.
  - It is also acceptable for the applicant to initiate the next response by indicating that you will call to follow up with them.
  - Be sure to thank employers for their time and consideration.
  - Remember, your emphasis should be on what you can do for the employer, not what you hope to gain from the experience.
  - End the letter with “Sincerely” and your name.

## **THE SALARY QUESTION**

- Applicants are sometimes asked to include salary requirements. The cover letter is the place to do this. As a recent grad, your salary history doesn’t necessarily reflect your abilities. Here are a few key salary tips to keep in mind if asked about this:
  - Never give a specific dollar amount, but instead list a range.
  - Let your prospective employer know that salary isn’t the only criteria by which you judge a job offer.
  - Research salary information for comparable positions and companies/cities (e.g., at [www.salary.com](http://www.salary.com)).

## **DELIVERING A COVER LETTER**

- If sending electronically, send your resume and cover letter as PDF’s to preserve formatting unless otherwise instructed.
- In certain circumstances, you can use your email as the cover letter with your resume as the attachment; otherwise, consider sending a shorter, introductory email referring to the job application and attached documents.

- If providing a hard copy of your cover letter, use high-quality matching bond paper for your resume, cover letter, and envelopes in white or ivory.

#### **APPLICANT FOLLOW-UP**

- Applicants who have not heard from an employer after two to three weeks (or significantly after the position closing deadline) may choose to follow-up by email or telephone.
- Follow-up should be directed to the original contact person.
- Take a "low key" approach - state the date the original application materials were sent; ask if it was received (the Post Office and the internet are not infallible); restate your interest in that specific position; and ask where they are in their selection process. It is important that the follow-up does not come across to the prospective employer as, "Why haven't I heard from you?".

## Sample Cover Letter

Bobbi La Follette  
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Madison, WI 53706  
608-123-4567  
blafollette@lafollette.wisc.edu

September 29, 2014

Ms. Mary Smith  
Human Resources Director  
World Hunger  
Lloyd Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Ms. Smith:

I am writing to apply for the position of Policy Analyst, which I learned about on World Hunger's website. I will graduate with my Master of Public Affairs from the University of Wisconsin-Madison La Follette School of Public Affairs in May 2014, and I am confident that my education and professional background will qualify me to make a substantial contribution to your organization.

My experiences and values are a strong match for this position. I am specifically interested in your organization's focus on social injustice and poverty in Latino neighborhoods and in applying my analytical skills to help address these problems. In the course of completing my master's degree, I developed strong quantitative skills, consistently met self-imposed deadlines, and produced work that received praise from my faculty advisors. For example, as part of my Capstone Course final project, completed for a local non-profit client, Centro Hispano, I conducted a literature review of over 40 articles and books. As a result, I mastered large amounts of statistical information and identified issues in need of further research in minority poverty. These research, writing, and analytical skills will serve me well as a consulting analyst, as I can acquire expertise quickly and apply it to solve particular problems.

I also developed my leadership skills as the president of the Students for Haitian Relief Club, an organization formed in response to the Haitian earthquake. Setting and exceeding a fundraising goal of \$10,000, I led a team in recruiting student donors. Capitalizing on a rivalry between two student organizations, I created a competition-based fundraiser with prizes from local vendors. I thoroughly enjoyed devising a creative path to reach and exceed a challenging goal. I believe working as a consultant in your organization would allow me to apply my rigorous analytical training to generating resolutions to the issues of poverty, inequality, and social injustice.

I welcome the opportunity to learn more about the policy analyst position and discuss my quantitative, analytical, and leadership skills in more depth. I look forward to hearing from you and can be reached via phone at 608-123-4567 or email at blafollette@lafollette.wisc.edu. I will follow up with you in one week to ensure that you received my application materials. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Bobbi La Follette