

How to Write an Effective Cover Letter

QUESTION: How is a cover letter (CL) different than a resume and why do I need a whole document to explain it?

ANSWER:

An effective resume	An effective cover letter
Details your knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs)	Does not simply regurgitate information that is already on the resume but uses the KSAs you wrote for those detailed bullet points you learned about in How to Write an Effective Resume as a jumping off point
Demonstrates to a potential employer that what you have done (and what you are most skilled in doing) is exactly what they are seeking in a new hire	Introduces you to your potential future employer <i>as a colleague</i> - it should help them start to see your future with their company/agency
Gives details on the when/where/ why for the things that you have achieved/accomplished in your professional life	Should make the employer curious to know more about the person who did all the things listed on the resume and feel like they <i>need</i> to talk to you to learn more
Should be easy to read, not filled with jargon or statements that don't really make sense unless the reader knows the employer you worked for	Tells the prospective employer why you want <i>their</i> job/internship, and why you will be a great fit for <i>their</i> company/agency; it should feel like you did at least a little research before hitting APPLY NOW
	Has the power to turn a so/so looking candidate into an Interviewee, or conversely turn a solid-seeming candidate into a "meh" (when this happens, it is often due to poor writing skills and lack of clarity on the employer/job)

Ways to help you think about the cover letter

1. It is your pre-interview interview – a chance to create a connection with the employer
2. It is like the text portion of a dating app (where the resume is your stats). If well written, it gets the employer to “swipe right” on your candidacy because they feel like they need to know more!

MYTHS and FACTS

MYTH: The cover letter is the most important part of the job application

- **FACT:** Some employers never read cover letters at all
 - If you see the words “Cover Letter Optional” on a vacancy announcement, believe it. This is not at all uncommon with government employers at the state and federal level
 - There are employers who have neither the bandwidth nor the interest in reading CLs
- **FACT:** Most employers review the resume *before* reading the cover letter to determine if a candidate looks promising. Here’s what the hiring process often looks like from the inside:
 - Human Resources (HR) has a stack of 100-1000+ applications to review and one position to fill and is *looking for reasons to toss candidates out!*
 - They start by scanning the resumes for candidates who seem qualified, and based on the strength of the resume, put candidates into their YES, NO, or MAYBE piles
 - Yesses and Maybes get their entire application read in depth
 - Nos usually meet the recycling bin and never get the chance to move forward

MYTH: You can use the same basic cover letter to apply for multiple opportunities

- **FACT:** You do so at your own peril
 - The cover letter may be your only chance to create a connection with an employer, and there is no way that the same cover letter you wrote to the Pew Charitable Trust will also speak to the Gates Foundation *even if the position title is the same*
 - Employers can smell a stock CL a mile away

Who should it be addressed to? 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:

- Call company/agency HR department directly and ask for a contact person for the position
- Check Handshake for contact information for companies who recruit at UW Madison
- If you cannot find any name to whom to address the cover letter, use "Dear Hiring Manager."

Tips for electronic delivery: Send your resume and cover letter as PDF attachments to preserve formatting *unless otherwise instructed*. If completing an online application which asks you to upload your resume, you can save the cover letter and resume as a single document and upload them as one attachment. If sending an email, you may include the cover letter in the body of the email as well as an attachment, or consider sending a shorter, introductory email referring to the attached resume and cover letter. *"Attached please find my resume and cover letter..."*

Addressing "Difficult" Issues

Difficult issues can be anything from the need for a certain start or end date, to a disability requiring accommodations, to why an employer should hire a candidate who needs to move from central Wisconsin to Washington DC. Basically, difficult issues are anything that make you worried that the employer might exclude you from the candidate pool before you even get a chance to present yourself in person if not addressed in some way at this stage of the hiring process.

- *To address or not to address?* – Obviously, you'd much rather explain these things in person during an interview, but if you are worried you may never get an interview unless you explain them first, check with the La Follette career coordinator
- *Be succinct* – If you do address something, don't spend more than 1-2 sentences on it. You are merely trying to be proactive, not giving the employer your life story
- *Where should difficult things be mentioned?* – Difficult items should only be brought-up in the final paragraph of the cover letter
- *Salary Requirements* - Applicants are sometimes asked to include salary requirements. If you must address this in the cover letter, the final paragraph is the place to do it. Here are a few key tips to keep in mind if asked about this:
 - Try to never give a specific dollar amount, but instead list a range if possible (e.g \$55,000-\$85,000)
 - Let your prospective employer know that salary isn't the only criteria by which you judge a job offer (benefits!)
 - Research salary information for comparable positions on www.salary.com or www.glassdoor.com in advance so that you will know what is reasonable to ask for in the market where you are job hunting

More on the next page



BASIC COVER LETTER FORMATTING

Your street address (notice your name is not here)

Your City, State and Zip Code (no phone number or email address)

Date

Contact's name

Title (if known)

Organization Name

Street Address (if known)

City, State and Zip Code (if known)

SALUTATION: "Dear Mr. Smith:" or "Dear Ms. Jones:" or simply "Dear Hiring Manager:" or "Dear Hiring Committee:"

INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH (Thesis Statement)

Start with a "grabber" statement that shows your excitement and interest. This is also your chance to tell the employer how you heard about the position and/or mention a personal connection you have with the organization (if there is one). Tell them why their organization and its work appeals to you. Then add a direct and confident thesis statement to tell the employer why you and the they belong together. It should be without being arrogant or dry. *E.g.: "Brian Jenkins, Director of your Environmental Policy office, recently told me about the Management Analyst position at XYZ. I have been following XYZ's work on the new wetlands reclamation project for the state of Louisiana for some time and I would like to demonstrate how my research, environmental policy analysis, and project management skills make me an excellent candidate for this position."*

BODY PARAGRAPHS (Proof Statements)

The Body of the cover letter is the place where you support your Thesis Statement from the Intro Paragraph by making connections for the employer between your skills and the needs of their business. Instead of rehashing what is on your resume, relate what the employer is seeking to instances when you have done similar things. Unlike the resume, examples can come from a class, a job or internship, or even in your personal life (e.g. if they really want someone with anti-racism credentials, and the only way you can show yours is to mention your active involvement in BLM protests and/or your active role in correcting friends/relatives/strangers online about inaccurate statements about the BIPOC community, then do so!) Body paragraphs should demonstrate two things: 1) *Why you are a good fit for the job, and 2) Why you want to work for this specific employer (why they appeal to you based on their mission/actions)*

CONCLUSION PARAGRAPH

Restate your interest: "I hope this letter gives you an idea about how excited I am at the prospect of working for XYZ..." and close by thanking them for their time and consideration. This is also the place to mention any "difficult issues" if you need to do so.

Sincerely,
Your Name