

Cover Letter Guide



For positions in industry, government, and non-profits, a cover letter is a one-page document that typically accompanies a resume. You should send a letter even if it is not requested or listed as optional.

Formatting Essentials

For most job applications, cover letters should be kept to **one page**. In general, a 3-4 paragraph letter is best.

As with resumes or CVs, **refrain from disclosing personal data** (marital status, weight, race, etc.) that does not support the goal of the cover letter.

Find out who you are addressing the letter to. This may involve emailing or calling the company to ask directly.

Dear Dr. Smith is a much stronger opener than *To Whom It May Concern*.

Single spacing is standard for cover letters.

As with a CV or resume, **use a 10-12 point font**. Use the same font that you plan to use in your resume or CV.

In your heading, include your **name, address, and other contact information**. This is followed by the date, and the name and contact information of whom you are addressing the letter.

What to Write

In the **first paragraph**, introduce yourself and answer the reader's question, "Why should I be interested in this candidate?" Name the position you are interested in, and how you learned about the opening. If appropriate, say who referred you. State where you currently work or attend school and why you believe you are a good fit for the position.

In the **middle paragraph(s)**, directly link your experience to the needs of the employer. Give specific examples of transferable skills, accomplishments, and results.

Your cover letter should **convey confidence in a professional way**. Avoid coming on too strong ("You should hire me for this position").

Create a concluding paragraph that reiterates your interest and qualifications for

the position. Refer the reader to your enclosed resume and state you will follow up within a given period of time. Confirm how to contact you (phone and email), and thank the reader for reviewing your application.

Research the employer before you write the letter. Use specific examples to demonstrate how you would be a strong candidate for the position.

Instead of stating your skills:

"Communication and outreach skills."

Show you're experienced with evidence and examples:

"I am proficient in communicating scientific concepts to non-scientific audiences, as exemplified by my experiences teaching introductory science courses at Michigan State University and volunteering with grade school students at the annual Science Fest event in East Lansing."

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Online Resources



The versatile PhD

Includes real examples of cover letters, resumes, and other written credentials from PhDs hired into a variety of careers in the public and private sectors.

versatilephd.com

Note: First time users of Versatile PhD will need to log in through MSU; you can access the link on the Versatile PhD website.

MSU PhD & Graduate Student Career Resources: Help preparing your written documents.

careersuccess.msu.edu/phdcareers/search/resumes

MSU Career Services Network Written Credentials Resources: A list of tips for creating a resume and access to appointment scheduling with career advisors.

careernetwork.msu.edu/resources-tools/cover-letters

Resumes/Cover Letters (Stanford): A resource with sample resumes and guides on how to construct an effective resume or cover letter.

stanford.io/1fvX01R

Cover Letters (Illinois): Includes a list of resume samples and the common types of resumes.

grad.illinois.edu/careers/nonac-letters

Mastering the Modern Cover Letter: a great piece on how to make your cover letter stand out from the University of Washington.

bit.ly/1WcMuWU

Job Search Letters (Dartmouth): A guide to writing cover letters, informational interview request letters, and thank you letters.

graduate.dartmouth.edu/careers/services/letters.html

Cover Letter Organization & Formatting (Purdue): A guide to formatting and organizing cover letters effectively.

bit.ly/1rux7tE

The Cover Letters That Make Hiring Managers Smile (The Muse): A list of tips to effectively write a cover letter.

bit.ly/1kzEU4L

The Cover Letter: Relic or Still Relevant? (Science Careers): Reasons why writing a cover letter is a good idea when applying for positions.

bit.ly/1eKkMfl

Learn From These 6 Real-Life Cover Letter Failures (US News & World Report): Six cover letter failure examples.

bit.ly/1ff7qEJ

Quiz: Is your cover letter like a bad handshake? (Career Builder): A quiz that assesses your cover letter language.

bit.ly/1IVUWWN

Forget Cover Letters: Write a Pain Letter Instead: an innovative approach to cover letters that addresses how you would solve a company's needs.

onforb.es/1CaCD7e

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