

Cover letters

PDCO Career Resources

Cover letters are often no longer a central component of an application for non-academic positions. According to a 2017 Jobvite national survey, only 26% of recruiters now consider cover letters to be important in their hiring decisions. If your hiring manager is in that 26% however, it is to your benefit to write a strong, tailored, and convincing letter, especially if you are entering a field where you will be expected to write.

Your cover letter should be a short, concise document of no more than one page. It should not mirror or re-use bullet points from your resume. The cover letter offers you the opportunity to be creative and highlight your personality and your unique qualifications for the position.

As with your resume, your cover letter should be tailored to the position and employer you are applying to work for. Do **NOT** send out a generic cover letter template for multiple positions. Hiring managers will be able to quickly see that you did not take the time to appropriately cater your application materials to their employer and will not invite you for an interview.

You should think carefully about the job advertisement and the key qualifications the employer is asking for in the position description. Brainstorm two to three particularly relevant qualifications from the job advertisement that highlight that you are a good match for this role. Incorporate skills from the job description in your cover letter. Be sure to provide specific examples describing how you obtained these skills and when you used them in previous work or research environments.

Your letter should aim to address the following questions:

- Why do I want to work for this employer? What about this position is attractive to me?
How does this job fit into my long-term career trajectory?
- What unique skills and experience can I bring to the position and employer?
- Why am I the ideal candidate for this position? In other words, why should the employer choose to interview me over other applicants who are qualified for the position?
 - Make it easy for the hiring manager to see that you are exactly the kind of applicant they are looking for.

Formatting your cover letter

General tips:

- Maximum of one page

- Use the same professional font, font sizes, and margin widths that you used in your resume. Make your cover letter look like part of a cohesive application package.
 - Times New Roman, Arial, Calibri with at least 11 pt. font
- Even though most cover letters are sent via e-mail or uploaded into an online system, they should follow a formal letter format.

Header:

- At the top- your address, your phone, your e-mail, aligned left
- Today's Date, aligned right
- Contact Name (if you have it), Organization Name, Organization Address, Organization Phone, Organization E-mail, aligned left
- Dear (insert name or position title of hiring manager)

Introduction:

- No longer than 3-4 sentences
- State your objective for writing the cover letter. Make sure to mention the specific job title and employer in the very first sentence.
- Tell your reader where you first learned about the position. Do you have a point of contact within the organization who referred you for the job? Make sure to mention these kinds of connections (with the permission of the contact) as they will show that you already have a tie to the organization and a specialized understanding of the kind of work that they do.
- Briefly introduce yourself and provide the most pertinent background information about your educational and professional experience that indicate your 'fit' for the position.

Body Paragraphs:

- 1-2 paragraphs that are approximately 3-5 sentences each
- Include 2-3 specific examples that highlight your skills and experience, using keywords from the job advertisement, where relevant.

Final Paragraph:

- No longer than 3-4 sentences
- Summarize in 1-2 sentences why you are a good fit for the position and employer.
- Provide instructions to the employer as to how to best get in contact with you and provide them with a timeframe in which you will contact them to follow-up on the status of your application (typically within 1-2 weeks).
- Thank the recipient for their consideration of your application.

Closing

- End your letter with a closing (Examples: Regards, Best, Sincerely, etc.)
- Leave several lines of space and type your name
- Sign your name (if you are mailing the application)

The Office of Intramural Training and Education at the National Institutes of Health crafted the following guide that outlines the structure of a cover letter for non-academic positions. You can find that resource and more advice from the NIH on writing effective cover letters in their [complete guide](#).

Your street address
City, state, zip code

Date

Dr./Ms./Mr. Recipient's First and Last Name [Note: Not both Dr. and PhD] Title
Organization Name
Street Address
City, state, zip code

Note: This part is removed if sent in email body

Dear Dr./Ms./Mr. Last Name:

PARAGRAPH #1
Express interest and explain why you are writing and how you found out about the position. If you have a good contact or a connection with the organization, state it here. Also, try to answer the question "Why them?" if possible, clarify how their mission aligns with your own.

PARAGRAPH #2
Focus the second and the third paragraphs on two to three particularly relevant qualifications from the position description which highlight that you are a good match for this role. Explicitly list skills, but be sure to back these up with specific examples of how you obtained these skills and when you used them.

PARAGRAPH #3
Continue to create your narrative for the employer by elaborating on your qualifications. Refer to examples on your resume, but don't repeat bullet points. Remember to use the second and third paragraphs to answer the question "Why you?" The aim: make it easy for them to see that you are exactly what they are looking for. Perhaps even highlighting how this position fits into your over-all career plan.

PARAGRAPH #4
Quickly summarize your skills and reiterate your enthusiasm for this opportunity. Express you plan to follow up via email or phone within a certain period of time or invite the employer to contact you for more information if needed. Last but not least, thank the employer in advance for her/his time and consideration of your candidacy.

content tips

Sincerely,

Your handwritten signature (if sending a hard copy letter)
Your full name (typed)

Resources

- [‘5 Must-Do Steps for the Perfect Cover Letter’](#)
- [Stanford ‘PhD & Postdoc Career Guide’, pgs. 56-61](#)
- [University of Illinois, ‘Nonacademic Cover Letters’](#)