

ULTIMATE GUIDE TO COVER LETTERS

Seaver College Career Center,
Pepperdine University

seaver.pepperdine.edu/careercenter/



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About Cover Letters

Purpose

While your resume is designed with the goal of getting you a job interview, the purpose of the cover letter is to persuade the employer to read your resume and read it seriously.

In particular, your cover letter is an important marketing tool, which highlights your most attractive qualifications as a potential employee

Writing Style

Writing a cover letter requires preparation and reflection. A successful cover letter clearly articulates the value of a candidate to the employer. Consider these strategies for preparing your letter:

What does the organization need? This is a two-step process. First, you must understand something about the organization's mission, vision, and culture. As an applicant, you will want to know whether you are a "mission fit" and "culture fit" and if so, be able to articulate this "fit" in your cover letter and then, interview. Second, you must understand the open position to which you are applying and what the ideal candidate looks like. This can be challenging because after all, the organization may not know what the ideal candidate looks like. Despite this challenge, you must make an effort to gather clues.

Gather clues from the job posting itself paying special attention to words or phrases that are used more than once. You can also gather clues from contacts within the organization, its web site, and its annual report (in the case of publicly traded companies and some non-profits).

Understand what you can offer. Your offering includes all your transferrable skills, abilities, experiences, and personality traits. To best express your offering, you must reflect on yourself from a perspective outside your current job and career field.

Align your offering and their need. The most important step in preparing for your cover letter is defining how you can uniquely meet the organization's needs. Keep the employer's needs in mind, not your own. This means that instead of explaining what you want, explain what you can do for them. The message of your cover letter must articulate clearly, and convincingly how your offering (ie, skills, abilities, experiences, and personality) will meet the need of the organization (mission, culture, job requirements).

And by putting yourself in the reader's situation, you will better understand his/her needs. After this analysis you can write a letter demonstrating how your background, training, work experience, and abilities can meet those needs. Such an approach will help you persuade the reader that you are a good match for the position and that he/she should interview you. Remember that you are responsible for explicitly communicating your value to the employer. Do not expect employers who typically receive hundreds of letters for each job opening to wade through a great deal of text or a poorly written, mundane, or disorganized letter to figure out what you can do for them.

Basic Principles:

When writing your cover letter it is crucial that you do not simply repeat the content in your resume. Additionally, do not copy sample cover letters verbatim. In essence, your cover letter is your opportunity to tell the hiring manager about yourself. It is the answer to the question, "Tell me about yourself and why I should hire you."

- Sell yourself! Tell them why they should hire you. Be positive, and sound professionally real, without being artificially formal. Read the letter out loud to see if it flows naturally, and has a conversational tone.
- Plan your letter accordingly, placing the most important items first, supported by facts.
- Take the time to research each employer's organization and personalize each letter. Indicating that you know something about the company shows that you are careful and interested in the employer. This approach is much more effective than sending out hundreds of identical form letters.
- Highlight one or two of your most significant accomplishments or abilities to show you are an above average candidate. Selecting only one or two special attributes helps your chances of being remembered. Be brief; demonstrate that you understand the value of the reader's time.
- Use a polite, formal style that strikes a balance between confidence in yourself and respect for the employer. Be clear, objective, and persuasive rather than simply describing your background.
- Be positive in tone, content, and expectations. Do not add details about yourself, your past experience, or your preparation that may call attention to your weaknesses or raise questions about your confidence or ability to do the job.
- Use active voice and powerful action verbs in your writing to hold the reader's interest and convey a sense of energy.
- Group similar items together in a paragraph; then organize paragraphs so that they relate to each other logically. Avoid writing that lumps together unrelated information without a strong topic sentence to tie the information together.
- Always back up general statements with specific facts or examples. Documentation creates credibility and reduces uncertainty and abstraction for the reader.
- Avoid jargon and clichés. It is tempting to use ready-made phrases such as "self-starter," "proven leadership skills," "excellent interpersonal skills," etc., but using today's buzz words can suggest parroted formulas rather than original thought.
- Check the spelling and grammar in all correspondence. If you are not confident of your ability to detect grammatical, punctuation, or English usage errors or if you need help in organizing your letters, bring your correspondence to a professional for assistance.

- Never misrepresent yourself by overstating your experience or skills. Even if you do not have every qualification sought by the employer, stick to the facts and tell the truth by emphasizing your strengths.

Strategies

- **Highlight** accomplishments, measurable results, and qualitative skills and support with examples.
- **Keep the focus on what you will add to the company**, not how this will help your career. For example, avoid “Your company has such a strong reputation and it would be a great opportunity for me to work for you.”
- **Use simple, clear sentences.** Choose every word carefully. Constantly ask yourself, “Is there any way I can say this more clearly?” And, “Am I communicating my ideas to the best of my ability?”

Standing Out in the Crowd

- **Be yourself.** A “formula” approach is fine, but each letter should reflect your personality and your enthusiasm. Let it shine through. Take pride in who you are and what you’ve done. The reader is looking for a human being, a person who knows what he or she can offer and can express it well.
- **Clearer expression.** Take the time to craft your words and sentences to mean exactly what you intend and you’ll be in great shape. Ask others to review your letter/résumé to ensure that you’re communicating what you want to say.
- **Write in the active tense.** Active verbs are the key when writing cover letters and résumés. Instead of saying, “...my best attributes include team play and motivating people,” say “I’m a dedicated team player who can motivate people...” The latter promises a go-getter employee – someone who can take action instead of waiting to be led by the hand.

Elements of a Cover Letter

Heading

You must use the same heading as you have on your resume. Ensure your name is prominently displayed and also includes your current address and contact information.

Address Line

The address line should include the date, the organization name, and street address. Additionally, you may include the name and title of the hiring manager, or contact name on the job posting. If you do not know the contact person, keep this gender neutral. For example, “Dear Director” instead of “Dear Sir”.

Introduction Paragraph

In this paragraph, specify the position to which you are applying, how you learned of the position, and ask that your resume be considered for the job. For example, if a friend recommended that you write someone he knows at a company, don’t start with “My friend, John Peterson, told me you have a job opening so I thought I would write.” That

will not impress anyone. Instead, try something like “I was thrilled when my friend, John Peterson, told me there was an opening for an assistant photographer at your company.” Show a little excitement and passion for the potential employment.

Body Paragraph(s)

This section should be no more than two paragraphs. Use this space to explain why you are well-suited for the job. Use the job description as a guide, just like you used it as a guide for your resume. Based on your reflections in preparing, articulate how your offering meets the needs of the position and organization. Pull examples from your resume to justify the claims made in this section. Here you should describe your qualifications for the job – skills, talents, accomplishments and personality traits. But don't go overboard. Only pick the top three talents or characteristics that would make you stand out as a candidate. Your résumé is there to fill in the details.

Describe why you think you'd fit into the company – why it would be a good match. Maybe you like their fast growth, know people who already work there or you've always used their products. Companies feel good if the candidate feels some connection to them and has a good understanding of how the company works, even before he or she is hired.

Closing Paragraph

In this section, discuss your interest in scheduling an interview. Briefly explain your availability and provide your phone number. Lastly, thank him/her for considering your application.

Common Mistakes

- **Writing to a department or title.** It's always best to write to a real person with a real title. The exception to this is when you're answering an ad and specific contact information is not provided.
- **Using “Dear Sir.”** Many cover letter readers are women. If you cannot get the name and title of someone to write to, it's safer to use either a job title or generic title like “Dear Human Resources Manager,” or “Dear Sir/Ma'am.”
- **Overusing “I.”** It's okay to refer to yourself, but not in every sentence. Remember to use “you” even more. Show the “you” to whom you are writing that you're more concerned with meeting his or her needs than meeting your own.
- **Exaggerating your experience.** Don't “stretch” anything you say. Be completely truthful while still presenting yourself in the best possible light.
- **Forgetting to give the employer a way to contact you.** Never forget to include your phone number or email address or both. How will the employer let you know about your upcoming interview if he or she can't call and tell you about it?
- **Forgetting to sign the letter or to attach your résumé.**

Cover Letter Checklist

Busy people do not want to read long letters from people they do not know. The following tips will increase the “readability” of your cover letter and are standard expectations for cover letters across most industries:

- Limit to one page
- Follow standard business letter format
- Leave wide margins (minimum 1 inch)
- Use a clean, simple font like Arial or Times New Roman
- Use the same heading on your cover letter as on your resume
- Maintain 10- or 12-point type minimum
- Proofread carefully
- Ask a friend to proofread carefully

Other Types of Letters

You will probably use seven types of letters in your search: application, prospecting, networking, thank you, acceptance, withdrawal, and rejection.

1. Application Letter

The purpose of this letter is to get the employer to read your resume and invite you for an interview. Use this type of letter to respond to job advertisements and vacancy announcements. Your approach here is to show that your qualifications fit the employer's requirements for the position. Analyze the position description carefully and pick out key phrases. Try to match your letter point by point to the requirements by emphasizing key parts of your resume.

2. Thank you Letter

Thank-you letters are used to express appreciation and strengthen your candidacy. They should be sent to everyone that helps you in any way. When sent after an employment interview, they should be mailed within 24 hours to each person that interviewed you. Be sure to reaffirm your interest in the position and to cite additional qualifications you may not have cited during the interview. You may also wish to clarify information that may not have been positively conveyed. Don't forget to send letters to people who granted you informational interviews or provided references.

3. Acceptance letter

Use this letter to accept a job offer. Your letter may confirm the terms of your employment (salary, starting date, hours, benefits, etc.). Usually employers will telephone first and discuss the terms of employment. Accepting the offer constitutes a moral (not legal) contract between you and the employer.

4. Withdrawal letter

The withdrawal letter may be used when you decide that you have no further interest in being considered for an employment opportunity. You may make this decision after having an interview or after deciding to accept another offer of employment. If you have decided to accept another offer, immediately notify all other employers of your decision and withdraw your application from consideration. Your withdrawal letter should thank the employer for his/her consideration. You may also want to indicate that your decision to withdraw was related to a better fit between your skills/interests/abilities and the other opportunity at this stage in your career. Do not burn bridges by saying that you obtained a better job or more money. Keep the doors open for the future by being courteous.

5. Rejection letter

Occasionally candidates may have to decline an offer when it does not mesh with short- or long-term career goals. This letter should be written carefully. Indicate that this was a difficult decision to make and that you have given it serious consideration. Be sure to thank the employer for his/her time, consideration, and the offer. It is not necessary to indicate which offer of employment you decided to take or where you will be working, but you may do so if you wish.

Appendix

Sample 1: Cover Letter Template

Your Street address
Your City, State Zip

Date of writing

Name
Title
Company
Street Address
City, State Zip

Dear Mr./Ms.:

1st paragraph Explain why you are writing; identify the position and your source of information. Indicate in summary form your strongest qualifications for the position using a series of phrases.

2nd paragraph Outline your strongest qualifications in more detail and show how they match the position requirements. As much as possible, provide evidence of your related work, extracurricular, and academic experiences and accomplishments. Refer to your enclosed resumé.

3rd paragraph Request an interview and indicate how and when you can be contacted. Thank the reader for his/her consideration.

Sincerely,

(Handwritten signature)

Your name, typed

Enclosure(s)

Sample 2: Cover Letter New Professional

Your Street Address
Your City, State Zip

Date of writing

Name
Title
Company
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Mr./Ms:

I am applying for the Sales Associate position which we discussed during the Career Fair at The George Washington University in Washington, D.C. on (date). My varied sales experience and my bachelor's degree in Business Administration are my strongest qualifications for this position.

As you can see from the enclosed resume, I have sold a variety of products through my extracurricular activities and have worked in many banking environments through my cooperative education and internship positions. My marketing, computer research, and customer relations experiences, as well as my oral and written communication skills, should prove valuable in increasing (name of company's) sales volume. I am enthusiastic about pursuing a career in sales with (name of company) because of its diverse product line and international scope.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and can be reached at (phone number) from noon to five daily. I will be in New York next week and will call you on (date) to discuss the possibility of an interview.

Sincerely,

(Handwritten signature)

Your name, typed

Enclosure(s)

Sample 3: Cover Letter Entry-Level

Seaver College Career Center – Complete Guide to Letters

June 20, 2007

Mary Rider
Gottschalks
1122 Chalk Blvd.
Los Angeles, CA 90023

Dear Ms. Rider,

The World Review Newspaper is currently running your ad for a Junior Accountant to service a small accounting department within Gottschalks. You will find my background and experience directly applicable to your accounting needs and I have enclosed my resume for your review.

Over the years, I have developed and completed three internships in accounting departments in Northern and Southern California. In the last internship, I developed an efficient accounting information system for a small manufacturer. In order to develop this system, I performed a cost analysis and constructed a budget using and both Windows and Macintosh computers. In my first internship, I performed all aspects of a major audit under extremely short deadlines. Basic accounting principles come easily to me and I am extremely accurate in all my transactions.

Please contact me at the address and phone number below. I look forward to hearing from you. I am geographically mobile and willing to begin employment immediately.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Randy Ohlway
1123 Hoffer Ave.
Chico, CA 95926
(916) 343-5678

Sample 4: Cover Letter New Professional

May 5, 2001

543 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90265

Ms. Lana Lanier
South Bay Design Associates
210 Main Avenue
Manhattan Beach, CA 90405

Dear Ms. Lanier,

While attending an American Marketing Association seminar in Santa Monica last week, I learned that your firm is hiring an additional graphic designer to assist in marketing residential real estate projects.

My education in communications and marketing at Pepperdine University, combined with my additional creative experience in interior and environmental design, are an excellent match to the work you require. As outlined on my resume, I have also had technical experience with computer-aided design, am proficient at drafting and rendering, and am comfortable making presentations. I place a high priority on client/user involvement, account management, demographic research, and customer relations, all valuable assets to successful marketing.

Your firm has an excellent reputation, especially the recent high quality development of Sand Harbor Homes. My qualifications would enable me to perform this job well, while enhancing my knowledge with your team of design professionals. I would appreciate an opportunity to meet to discuss my qualifications and to learn more about this position. In the meantime, I may be reached at (310) 451-6504, or through e-mail at llanier@aol.com in case you have additional questions.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Lana Lanier

Enclosure

Sample 5: Thank You Letter

Your Street Address
Your City, State Zip

Date of writing

Name
Title
Company
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Mr./Ms:

1st paragraph: It was a pleasure to visit you and to meet the members of your staff. I was pleased with the opportunity to get a closer look at (name of organization) and to hear of the many ventures being undertaken.

2nd paragraph; (See suggestions below for possible applicable paragraphs.)

3rd paragraph: I was most impressed with your organization, especially in the area of quality control. As I understand, you will contact me within a month regarding further consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon. Thank you again for the interview.

Sincerely,

(Handwritten signature)

Your name (typed)

Option #1: Add information not covered in the interview: In reviewing the interview, I was aware that we did not discuss the area of _____. I would like to add that my summer employment provided an opportunity for development of some expertise in the ___ aspect of __.

Option #2: Cover information unsatisfactorily presented in the interview: In reviewing the interview, I feel that I did not accurately answer your question about travel, schedule requirements, etc. I may have conveyed hesitancy about travel, or extra working hours or other special considerations. Your subsequent explanations and descriptions of the job helped me realize that I would find the situations mentioned to be acceptable.

Sample 6: Acceptance Letter

Your Street Address
Your City, State, Zip

Date of writing

Name
Title
Company
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Mr./Ms.:

I am pleased to accept your invitation to become an engineer for the Arthur Manufacturing Company at the monthly salary of \$xxx. I am certain that the duties assigned to me will be interesting and challenging.

Thank you for your offer of assistance in finding housing in Pittsburgh. This will make my relocation much easier.

I look forward to my future association with Arthur Manufacturing. As advised in your letter, I will report to your office at 8:30 a.m. on (date).

Sincerely,

(Handwritten signature)

Your name, typed

Sample 7: Rejection Letter

Your Street Address
Your City, State, Zip

Date of writing

Name
Title
Company
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Mr./Ms.:

Thank you for your employment offer for the position of Sales Manager with Arthur Manufacturing Company. I am unable to accept the offer since I have accepted a similar position with another company.

Thank you for providing the opportunity to interview with you, to discuss career possibilities, and to learn about the work of your organization. Best wishes for your company's continued success.

Yours truly,

(Handwritten signature)

Your name, typed

Sample 8: Withdrawal Letter

Your Street Address
Your City, State, Zip

Date of writing

Name
Title
Company
Street Address
City, State, Zip

Dear Mr./Ms.:

I want to express my sincerest appreciation for the opportunity to interview with (company). I valued our discussion about the position responsibilities, as well as the career possibilities within the firm, but find that they do not closely match my goals. I am therefore respectfully withdrawing from consideration.

Yours truly,

(Handwritten signature)

Your name, typed

Note: You may want to use the previous language in the event you no longer wish to be considered in the applicant pool.

Sample 9: Career Changing Prospecting Letter / Networking Letter

24255 Pacific Coast Hwy
Malibu, CA 90263

February 12, 2008

Katya Holland
Clear Blue
303 Center Street
Los Angeles, CA 90065

Dear Ms. Holland:

I am writing to you as a fellow graduate of Pepperdine University and would sincerely appreciate any insight you could provide regarding possible opportunities at Clear Blue. I have been working in sales for almost five years and am now looking to transition into the human resources field at a company such as yours.

Although successful in my sales career, I have realized that the aspects of my work that I am most skilled at and find most rewarding are my human resources-related duties. The following offers a few highlights of my qualifications:

- Solid foundation in HR affairs: As Senior Account Executive, I have been responsible for a number of HR functions, including recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and training new employees. A quick learner of complex concepts and legal issues, I am eager to broaden these skills.
- Dynamic communication style: I am skilled in building relationships, accomplishing group consensus, and promoting a shared sense of purpose. I am known for my ability to quickly establish trust with employees, mediate disputes, and motivate others into action.
- Experience in corporate training: A constant throughout my sales career has been my passion for the design and delivery of staff development programs. I am comfortable and experienced in giving both large and small-group presentations. I have conducted hundreds of training seminars for diverse audiences across all organizational levels.

If you know of anyone within Clear Blue who might be seeking someone with my qualifications, I would be very grateful for your referral. I would also welcome the opportunity to speak with you and can be reached at 310-123-4567. Finally, I am enclosing my resume in order to provide you with additional details regarding my background.

Thank you in advance for any assistance you may be able to provide.

Regards,

Christopher Moldovski

Sample 10: Networking Letter Through Referral

232 College Row
Dallas, TX 60610

January 28, 2008

Hanes Raprock
Director
Museum of Contemporary Art
220 E. Main Avenue
Dallas, TX 60611

Dear Mr. Raprock:

Henry Poulet, the Director of Cultural Development at the Louvre, suggested I contact you to ask for advice about pursuing a career in fine arts administration. I had the pleasure of working with Mr. Poulet last summer through an internship sponsored by the University of America, and found the work to be stimulating and well-suited to my talents. Mr. Poulet suggested that a discussion with you would be an excellent first step as I set out to explore my intended career path.

Please let me know if you would be able to have a 30 minute conversation with me regarding your career. I would greatly appreciate any advice you would be willing to share. I can be reached via email at dgiffin@yahoo.com, or (123) 456-7890. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Daniel Griffin

Sample 11: Networking Letter Through Pepperdine Alumni Network

2400 North Avenue
Chicago IL 60614
(540) 555-1123 / J_Walker@aol.com

January 23, 2008

Dominic G. Webb
Associate Director
Delon Hampton & Associates
800 Smith Street, Suite 720
San Diego, CA 12345

Dear Mr. Webb:

I will be graduating from Pepperdine University with a Bachelor of Arts in Art with a concentration in Design in June 2008. Currently, I am researching potential career paths and employment opportunities in the San Diego area. I obtained your name from Pepperdine University's Career Mentor Database and appreciate the fact that you volunteer to help students who are exploring career paths in your area of expertise. I hope that your schedule will permit you to provide me with some advice.

I am particularly interested in learning about the field of logo design and understand that your firm does work in this area. I am also interested in learning how the designers in your firm began their careers. My resume is enclosed to give you some information about my background and project work.

I would like to arrange a time to speak to you by telephone, or perhaps visit your office, if that would be convenient. I will contact you by phone in the next week to inquire about your availability during the week of February 21st, which is when I will be in the San Diego area.

Please also feel free to contact me at (540) 555-1123. I appreciate your time and consideration of my request and I look forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Jacob Walker

Enclosure