

How to Write an Effective Cover Letter

QUESTION: *How is a cover letter (CL) different from 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) using action verbs and achievements to prove you can do something	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 on the resume page 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 organization
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; avoid acronyms whenever possible	Tells the prospective employer why you want <i>their</i> job/internship, and why you will be a great fit for <i>their</i> organization; 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)

What about using AI?

1. You may be surprised to hear me say this but yes, you *can* use AI to help you write your professional documents!
2. However, under no circumstances should you let AI *write* your resume or your cover letter for you – it needs to be in your voice, and it must not look “cookie cutter” – employers toss those immediately
3. Use AI to help you analyze the job announcement and pick out areas in your CL that could be stronger (the [Career Director](#) is happy to guide you and help with AI prompt writing)

THINGS TO KNOW

- **41% of hiring managers** admit they don't read cover letters at all. However, while cover letters aren't universally read, they remain a powerful tool for many recruiters
 - o If an employer says “cover letter optional” it is highly likely that an ATS (applicant tracking software) is selecting candidates from submitted resumes and not reviewing CLs
 - o Nevertheless, skipping a cover letter could cost you an opportunity - especially when applying to roles where communication, personalization, or strategic thinking are key
 - o When in doubt, write one, but know that your resume is probably more important

- 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!*
 - If they have an ATS (and over 70% now do) they may never see your application at all unless the ATS selects your resume as a finalist or an alum helps you be seen by [recommending you](#)
 - If they don't use an ATS, they still usually start by scanning the resumes for candidates who seem to meet their qualifications, and based on the strength of the resume, move some candidates forward
- If you recycle the same basic cover letter to apply for multiple opportunities, 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 usually smell a form or AI written 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 for a future opening):

- Call the organization's HR department and ask for a contact person for the position
- If you cannot find any name for whom to address the cover letter, use "Dear Hiring Manager:"

Formatting

- You can use MS Word or PDF, the key is how many times have you sent it back and forth between formats? (ie: Word to Google back to Word, to PDF, to Google, etc...) The more times the format has been changed, the harder it is for an ATS to read and your documents may get tossed for machine illegibility!
- If you are completing an online application which asks you to upload your resume but provides no place to add a cover letter, you can save the CL 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 Director](#)
- *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 \$65,000-\$85,000)
 - 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 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

SAMPLE COVER LETTER ON NEXT PAGE

BASIC COVER LETTER FORMATTING

Date

Contact's name

Title (if known)

Organization Name

SALUTATION:

"Dear Mr. Smith:" *or* "Dear Ms. Jones:" *or simply*

"Dear Hiring Manager:" *or* "Dear Hiring Committee:"

I have been following XYZ's work on the new wetlands reclamation project for the state of Louisiana for some time now, so when Brian Jenkins, Director of your Environmental Policy office, recently told me about the Management Analyst position at XYZ I knew I had to show you how my research, environmental policy analysis, and project management skills make me an excellent candidate for this position.

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. Examples can come from a class, a job or internship, or even in your personal life (e.g. if they really want someone with project management experience, and the only way you can show yours is describe a leadership role you had in an academic course that worked on a project that achieved an outcome for which you can take some personal credit, then do so!) Whenever possible, try to use the employer's exact wording (e.g., "Utilized project management skills to....." not just "led a project").

Again, do not waste time and space regurgitating your resume. Bring in things that don't fit well on your resume such as academic experiences, journals you regularly read, professional associations you belong to, etc... Even if your resume goes to two pages, your CL should NEVER exceed one page.

Restate your interest: I hope this letter gives you an idea about how excited I am at the prospect of working for XYZ. I look forward to discussing my candidacy with you further. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Your Name