COVER LETTER GUIDE

GETTING STARTED

A cover letter is your introduction to a prospective employer. When well written, it demonstrates that you can think clearly and have good writing and organizational skills. An effective cover letter provides insight into your qualifications, prior experience, and motivation for contacting the employer. It is often the only example of your writing that an employer will see before making a hiring decision.

Research the organization carefully. Demonstrate in your cover letter that you appreciate and understand the organization's principal activities. Analyze the job description and figure out how your strengths and background can meet the job's requirements. Do not simply restate what is on your resume. Link the skills outlined on your resume and the employment needs of the organization. Make the reader "see" why you would be a good fit.

If there is no specific job description, read what else the employer says on the organization's website. The clues are there! If teamwork is something you see on the website as one of the employer's values, cite an example of your teamwork skills in your cover letter. If community service is a value, outline an achievement in this area.

Whenever possible, address the letter to a specific person. If you do not know whom to address or are unclear about the contact's gender, call the organization and find out! When the contact is unknown, ask for the name and title of the person in charge of the division to which you are sending the letter. The name of the addressee is preceded with an appropriate title such as Mr., Ms., Dr., etc. If you absolutely cannot find a name, use "Dear Hiring Manager" or "Dear Selection Committee." Avoid "To Whom It May Concern" like the plague.

Write a new cover letter for each position for which you are applying. An employer can easily detect a canned letter.

Think of your cover letter as a marketing venture or ad campaign for yourself. Just as in a good film, the story is what draws the audience in. For your cover letter, pull out a couple of the most compelling stories that will help bring you to life for the recruiter.

CONTENT

Limit the letter to one page. If your letter does not fit on one page, do not shrink the font, edit the text! Keep it simple and to the point in no more than four short paragraphs.

First Paragraph
State the area in the organization or specific position for which you are applying. If you are applying on the recommendation of a particular individual, mention his/her name here. Repeat what's in the job ad. If the ad is for a project manager with five-plus years of experience, start off by saying, "I am a project manager with five years of experience working for a top 10..."
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Second Paragraph
Present a coherent story, showing how your experience and study at Georgetown and during other academic experiences have prepared you for the position you are seeking. Do not waste the reader’s time by repeating information that is already on the resume, e.g. “I am a student at Georgetown and will graduate in May 2007.” Instead, use the vocabulary from the job description to highlight your specific skills, experiences, or knowledge.

Third Paragraph
This is the paragraph where you convince the reader that you are a good fit for the job and the organization. Focus on your prior employment, volunteer experiences, and/or internships and cite examples from these experiences. If the job requires research, tell how you used your research skills at another company to help write a successful proposal. If presentation skills are required, relate how you updated the CEO on a weekly basis. If you achieved results, include what you did that made the organization more successful.

Concluding Paragraph
This paragraph should be one or two sentences that reaffirm your interest. When appropriate, tell the employer how you will follow up on your application, e.g. “I will call you the week of March 10th.”

STYLE AND LAYOUT
Your style is your own, but you should have a business-like tone and write in the active voice. For example, it is better to say “I undertook and completed” than “I was asked to undertake and complete.” Use straightforward language, e.g. “as we discussed” not “as per our conversation.” Conjugated verb forms such as “don’t,” “I’ve” and “it’s” are not appropriate in a business letter.

Follow the conventional layout for a business letter. Your cover letter should be in the same font as your resume and printed on the same type of high-grade white or ivory-colored paper.

If using a letterhead with your name and contact information, use the same layout as your resume. Employers and recruiters work daytime hours so include daytime contact information.

The salutation, Dear Mr. Jones: is usually concluded with a colon on business letters versus a comma on personal letters.

The complimentary close, Sincerely, is followed by a comma and your signature underneath. There is no signature block if you have used a letterhead with your name. Remember to sign your name if you are sending a hard copy of your letter.

Spelling and grammar must be perfect. Use spell and grammar check to make sure.

If sending your cover letter and resume (and writing sample/s) by postal mail, use an 8½ by 11 envelope so your materials do not have to be folded. Use a paper clip to attach them, NOT a staple.
REMINDER CHECK LIST

✔ Do not dwell on what you can GET out of the experience but what will you BRING to the employer.

✔ Address your letter to a specific individual. Avoid “To Whom It May Concern.”

✔ Make sure the names of your contacts and of the organization are spelled correctly.

✔ If you do not know the gender of the addressee, call the organization.

✔ Personalize each letter and connect your skills to the job description.

✔ If you do use the same letter to apply to different organizations (not recommended), be very careful in cutting and pasting (e.g. do not address a new letter to McKinsey, but leave in the first paragraph a sentence saying that you are exceptionally qualified for Booz Allen).

✔ Do not repeat information directly from your resume. Highlight 2-3 key experiences most relevant to the position and expand upon them in more detail.

✔ Express self-confidence and optimism (but not arrogance).

✔ State specific facts and back up general statements with examples.

✔ Avoid the tone of a recycled or form letter.

✔ Be concise and to the point. Show you are an effective writer.

✔ Run spell check and grammar check! Then check everything again since grammar and spell check do not catch every mistake.

✔ Read your letter OUT LOUD to detect awkward phrasing or repetition of words and phrases.

✔ If English is not your first language, you may wish to ask a native speaker to check for correct usage.

✔ Save a copy! Reread your letter before you go to your interview so you can remember what you said!

✔ Include daytime contact information. Make sure your cell or home phone greetings are professional.
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Your name (Use same layout style as your resume)
  Your postal address
  Your e-mail address
  Your phone number

Date

Addressee’s Name
  His/Her Title
  Company
  Full Address

Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name:

The first paragraph should tell the reader who you are and why you are writing to them. Are you writing at the suggestion of a friend? Did you see a job listing? Express your interest with enthusiasm. You want to encourage the reader to continue.

Present a coherent story, showing how your experience and study at Georgetown and during other academic experiences have prepared you for the position you are seeking. Do not waste the reader’s time by repeating information that is already on the resume, e.g. “I am a student at Georgetown and will graduate in May 2007.” Instead, use the vocabulary from the job description to highlight your specific skills, experiences, or knowledge. Mix in some of your research about the company. If this is a career change for you, explain why you are making the move.

This is the paragraph where you convince the reader that you are a good fit for the job and the organization. Focus on your prior employment, volunteer experiences, and/or internships and cite examples from these experiences. If the job requires research, tell how you used your research skills at another company to help write a successful proposal. If presentation skills are required, relate how you updated the CEO on a weekly basis. This is not a rehash of your resume—emphasize the skills and accomplishments that most closely align with the position for which you are applying.

The concluding paragraph should be one or two sentences, reaffirming your interest. When appropriate, tell the employer how and when you will follow up on your application. Take control of the process and be proactive. If you mail out the letter and wait for the employer to call you, you may never be certain whether s/he actually received the letter or not. It is better to know “no,” than not to know at all.

Sincerely,

Your name, typed

Enclosure (Use this word if you are sending by postal mail and are enclosing your resume or other documents such as writing samples. Attach your documents by paper clip, NOT a staple.)