



Career Connections

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Career Guide:
**Writing a
Cover Letter**

How to Write a Winning Cover Letter

What is a Cover Letter?

A cover letter is a persuasive document used when applying for jobs that highlights your skills, ability to contribute to an organization, and knowledge of a company. It should accompany your résumé and is typically the first document an employer will see so, remember, first impressions count!

For every job you apply for, you should tailor a cover letter specific to that job description and organization. You will want to show how you meet the required qualifications of the position by highlighting two or three of your skills and/or experiences that directly pertain to the job you are applying for. Except for rare occasions, you should keep your letter to one page.

Getting Started

Get your cover letter started by thinking about both paid and unpaid experiences (work, volunteer), academic experiences, and special skills and abilities you possess. How do your skills match what is in the job description? Spend some time matching your current skills with competencies that are in the job description. The job posting should always shape what is in your cover letter.

After writing these down, see if any themes emerge, or if there are similar ideas that you can group together. After grouping similar ideas together, decide which are the most important for you to emphasize, and this will help you develop a structure. In a cover letter, you want to highlight your achievements and show how your skills and experiences can transfer to the position for which you are applying. Keep in mind that a cover letter is about highlighting the skills you do have, rather than the ones you do not, so keep your tone positive.

What you should do in a Cover Letter

- Clearly state what position you are applying for and, if relevant, how you heard about it.
- Your writing should be concise, formal and focused. Use simple, clear sentences rather than trying to impress the employer with unusual vocabulary or complex sentence structure.
- Address an employer by their name. Do research to find out who will most likely have the hiring decision within an office. This will typically be the head of the department that the position is in. You can call an organization to secure this information (unless the job posting says “do not call”). If the employer is female, you should use the surname “Ms.” rather than “Miss” or “Mrs.” You should only use “To Whom It May Concern” as a last option!
- PROOFREAD! Have several people read your cover letter as it is essential it be error free.
- Emphasize your strengths and the experience you do have, even if you don’t meet all of the job qualifications. Be careful though to not *over-emphasize* your abilities (for example, one part-time retail job doesn’t give you ‘extensive retail management experience’).
- Try to add something to the letter that shows you have done your research on the organization. Determine what sets this company apart from other similar businesses and show the employer that you know what makes them special.

- Strong cover letters address two essential questions: 1) Why do you want to work for this organization? And 2) What is it about your skill-set and previous experience that makes you a good fit for the organization? Make sure you are addressing both questions!
- Use examples. Rather than telling an organization “I’m a problem solver,” show them by saying “I created a new organization system in the science lab for students and faculty after noticing we lacked space for new equipment.”
- Be confident!

What you should avoid in a Cover Letter

- Avoid dwelling on your lack of experience in a certain area or talking at length about irrelevant experiences. For instance, if you applying for a job at a veterinary clinic, you do not want talk extensively about your summer job as a server.
- Unless it is a temporary position (like a summer job), you should not tell a company it would be a great place to “start” your career. Organizations rarely want to be seen as just a place for you to get your feet wet and then move on.
- Avoid abbreviations, slang, and casual language.
- Avoid repeating exactly what is on your résumé. Your cover letter is not a summary of your résumé, but an opportunity to highlight experiences and abilities that cannot be easily expressed in a résumé.

What to do if you’ve never had a job or have limited experience

Just because you have not held a job before, doesn’t mean you do not possess important skills and experiences that would make you qualified for a job in your chosen career field. You have likely had relevant experiences that you can point to from your classes, extracurricular activities, hobbies or past volunteer work.

If you are having difficulty coming up with relevant experiences that may qualify you for a job, ask yourself the following questions:

- What have I learned in my major or classes that would be relevant to the job I am applying for?
- Have I taken on any leadership positions outside of the classroom (e.g. clubs, volunteer work, church)? If so, what kind of leader was I? What projects did I contribute to? Did I solve any problems while I was in this position?
- Have I won any awards inside or outside the classroom? Why was I given this award?
- Have I studied abroad or spent time outside of my home country? What did I learn?
- What important qualities do I possess that would be desirable to an employer? How can I demonstrate this to the employer?

Cover Letter Sentence Starters

A cover letter should get the reader excited about your qualifications and make them want to read your résumé. You want to communicate your relevant skills and attributes while expressing enthusiasm towards a company or career field.

These sentence starters, adapted with permission from the [Skidmore Career Development Center Resume & Cover Letter Guide](#), are examples of what can be included in each section of your letter.

INTRODUCTION

- It is with great interest that I am applying for the position of _____.
- As a recent graduate of Landmark College and avid (writer, outdoorsman, animal lover), I believe I am a strong applicant for the position of _____.
- I am eager to apply for the position of _____ because I believe I have the _____ that it takes to be successful in this position.
- The _____ position recently advertised in the (newspaper, on your website, etc.) is a wonderful match for my talents and skills.
- Your organization impresses me because of _____, making it a place I would like to work for.
- (Name of contact you have at the company) speaks very highly of your organization, so I was thrilled when I saw a posting for the position of _____.

BODY

- My experience as a _____ will help me to contribute _____.
- Throughout my time in college, I have demonstrated skills and abilities that are exactly what the position of _____ demands.
- I can contribute to your company's effectiveness by _____.
- My previous success in _____ has proven my ability to _____.
- Working with _____ has strengthened and improved my already strong (analytical, research, interpersonal, organizational, etc.) skills.
- I am confident that I can be a valuable asset to your organization because _____.
- Being (a team player, results driven, a quick learner, etc.) who loves challenges, I will _____.
- My career goal is to _____. Therefore I welcome the opportunity make a contribution to your organization.

CONCLUSION

- I am eager to learn more about _____ and would like to discuss my qualifications and interests with you.
- I am very interested in this position and would love the opportunity to discuss my background and your requirements in greater detail.
- I look forward to hearing from you in the near future and hope to discuss my qualifications with you in greater detail.

Sample Cover Letter Outline

Jane Doe

123 Main Street - Putney, VT 05344
Ph# 555-555-5555 - janedoe@gmail.com

Month XX, XXXX

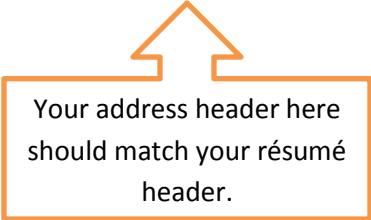
Name to whom the letter is addressed

Title

Organization

Address

City, State Zip Code



Your address header here
should match your résumé
header.

Dear Mr./Ms. LastName,

FIRST PARAGRAPH: WHY YOU ARE WRITING THE LETTER

State what position you are applying for and how you learned about it. If you know someone at the company, you could mention that here. Avoid starting the letter with “My name is Jane Doe and I am currently attending Landmark College.” They can clearly see your name at the top of the page and your résumé will make it clear you are a college student. This is also where you could demonstrate that you have researched the company or know something about their reputation.

MIDDLE PARAGRAPH(S): WHAT YOU HAVE TO OFFER

In this section you need to convince the readers that they should grant you an interview. Make connections between your abilities and their needs (based on the job description). You can pull language directly from the job description.

You want to make it clear in this section why you would be an asset to the company and are the best candidate for the job. Make sure to present evidence and examples for every statement you make. You can’t just tell an employer that you have a certain quality. You need to show them.

In this section, you may want to address topics such as previous job experience, internships, extracurricular activities, academic experiences, leadership opportunities, athletics, study abroad, and volunteer experiences.

CLOSING PARAGRAPH: REQUEST FOR FUTURE COMMUNICATION

The final paragraph should be short and sweet. Thank the reader for their time, and state that you look forward to future contact. You could also state your plan to follow up with them (“I will call in the following weeks and hopefully we can discuss my qualifications in further detail at that time.”)

Sincerely,
Your name

Sample Job Description and Cover Letter

Below is a job posting and cover letter written based on the description. Remember, you should always personalize your cover letters to specific job postings, focusing on the related experiences and skills that a company is looking for.

Job title: Admissions Counselor

Employer: Hogwarts University

Position Responsibilities and Duties:

Hogwarts University is seeking an Admissions Counselor for our fast-paced Admissions Office. The ideal candidate will become fully engaged in a broad range of recruitment and admission activities. Responsibilities will include the following:

- Recruit and advise prospective students through the admissions and financial aid process
- Interview prospective students on and off campus and prepare applicant evaluations
- Develop and maintain positive relationships with external school counselors, directors of guidance, college advisors, and independent educational consultants
- Manage outreach initiatives in multiple geographic territories
- Process and review applicant files
- Attend college fairs and high school visits within an assigned territory
- Extensive travel, evening and weekend work are required.
- Assist in online and social media marketing campaigns

Desired Qualifications:

- Bachelor's degree required
- Ability to function in a fast-paced environment both as part of a team and independently
- Highly organized
- Strong written, interpersonal, and oral communication skills
- Excellent sense of humor
- Advanced computer skills in Microsoft Office Suite
- Must be available nights and weekends and possess a valid driver's license

Susie Bee

1 River Road, Putney, VT 05344

(555)555-5555

Susiebee@address.net

September 1, 2014

Ms. Jackie Bossman
Director of Admissions
Hogwarts University
1 Magic Drive
Hogwarts, NY 01234

Dear Ms. Bossman,

I was excited to discover your online employment posting for the position of Admissions Counselor. I have been very active in my current college's admissions office as a tour guide and the experience has confirmed my desire to work in the dynamic field of higher education. Hogwarts University is a leader in the progressive magical education movement and I would be honored to play a role in bringing the best and brightest into this exciting community.

I have honed my interpersonal and public speaking skills as a Landmark College Student Ambassador, interacting with diverse populations on a regular basis that visit the College. In providing personalized tours for prospective students and their families, I have learned how to effectively communicate the mission and goals of the college while also thinking fast on my feet when challenging questions arose. During my final semester, I also participated in interviewing prospective students. I found this experience to be greatly rewarding as I helped students determine whether or not Landmark was the right fit for their educational needs.

In addition to my work as an admissions tour guide, I also was very active in Landmark College's Campus Activities Board. As the Communication and Marketing Officer for this organization, it was my responsibility to not only play a role in implementing campus-wide programs, but also advertise them to ensure that all events were well attended. I am proficient in social media marketing and feel comfortable using all facets of Microsoft Office Suite, particularly Publisher and Word. This experience provided me the skills to work effectively within the Campus Activities Board team, while also empowering me to work independently on marketing campaigns.

I look forward to the possibility of bringing my energy, knowledge and motivation to the Hogwarts University admissions team. I appreciate your time and consideration, and look forward to discussing my qualifications with you in further detail.

Sincerely,
Susie Bee