

## Getting to Work – Tool #8: Writing an Effective Cover Letter

The cover letter that accompanies your resume is an important part of a job application. It is the first opportunity you have to engage a prospective employer, tell your story, and persuade them to contact you for an interview. *Always* send one along with your resume when applying for a job, *even if it is not requested in the ad*.

### Cover letter basics

#### The format

The cover letter has three parts: the opening paragraph, the middle part, and the closing paragraph. It is recommended that the cover letter not exceed one page. However, there are some exceptions, (e.g., if you have participated in several relevant internships) when the cover letter could be slightly longer but should not exceed two pages in length. Again, keep in mind that if you do not grab the interest of the employer with the first page, no one will see your second page.

#### Opening

The first paragraph should be brief. In it, identify the name of the position to which you are applying and where you found the job advertisement. An employer (or the human resources division that receives your application) may have many openings simultaneously. Do not make them guess which one you are applying for! You may identify who referred you to the position, but only with their permission. Indicate your sincere interest in the position in the opening paragraph. This is where you show enthusiasm and interest!

#### Middle

The second section is the substantive portion of the cover letter, and it is typically one or two paragraphs in length. Its goal is to explicitly connect aspects of your background (e.g., phrases from your resume) with the job requirements as specified in the position description. Remember to show and not just tell why you are the ideal candidate.

#### Closing

This paragraph should also be brief. Thank the employer for considering your application and let them know that you look forward to the opportunity to meet in person to discuss the position. You might also include your contact information and convey that you have a flexible schedule. Reiterate your excitement and enthusiasm for joining the company/division/team.

#### Address the letter appropriately

Sometimes a job description lists a specific contact person. If that is the case, address the cover letter to that person. Do not assume the person is a man, woman, Dr., or any other category. Do some research on the person so that you can address the letter appropriately. If, even after some research, you are not sure about gender or title, your best option is to use “Dear [first name]” instead of “Dear Dr./Mr./Mrs./etc.” Sometimes there is no specific individual to whom you should address the letter. If that is the case, “Dear Hiring Manager” or “To whom it may concern” are equivalent and appropriate. “Dear Sirs” is not appreciated by many female managers.

#### Demonstrate your ability to write well

The cover letter is a professional letter; however, it need not be dull. Always use active voice and verbs, and check your spelling and grammar. Whereas making one mistake can hurt your candidacy for the job, writing eloquently can jump your resume to the top of the stack of serious contenders. An especially well-written cover letter will catch their attention. Ask someone at the university career center, a professor, or a friend to provide critical editorial comments on your draft cover letter before sending it. Avoid using big words or generic adjectives that do not have a lot of meaning. Instead, focus on being genuine, straightforward, and engaging.

#### Emphasize what you can contribute to the company

Be sure to convey to the employer what you would contribute to the company, not how you would personally benefit from having the job. For example, instead of telling the employer that you are excited by the prospect of this job because you want a job “close to home” or “I want to learn LabVIEW,” tell the interviewer why this is a good fit for you based on what *they* need. For example, “I am excited by the prospect of using my skills in data manipulation to help your team more efficiently process images.” Do not be dishonest, but focus on what excites you that will also benefit the company.

**Do your research**

Read the position description and carefully identify job requirements (e.g., knowledge and experience) and keywords. Search for additional information about the job position, the division, and the company to which you are applying.

**Sell yourself.**

Connect the requirements in the description with your experiences, skills, knowledge, and background. In short, highlight phrases from your resume that match the job description or stated requirements. Tell a story with specific examples of your experiences and abilities and correlate them to exactly what the employer is looking for.

For example: “I have over two years of experience using \_\_\_\_, the kinds of equipment that this position requires.”

**Mention your skills.**

It is okay to indicate aspects of your personality if you think that they might be applicable. Include intrapersonal skills you possess, such as time management, initiative, dependability, self-monitoring, organization, planning, and professionalism. However, avoid sounding generic by listing several traits—pick one or two to highlight and show these traits with specific examples rather than providing a broad list. For example: “As a result of my dependability and leadership, I was elected vice president of our Society of Physics Students chapter in my sophomore year.”

**Exercise - Tool #8: Building the “Middle” Paragraph(s) of Your Cover Letter**

⇒ For the same position description you used in Exercise #7, carry over the top five relevant key words or phrases. Then complete the second column.

Top 5 priority key words or phrases	Related “Show it” stories (from Exercise #5) - If you don’t have one for this key word or phrase, create one following the Exercise #5 guidelines.

⇒ Next, choose your strongest 2–3 “Show it” bullet points from this list and use them as the basis of the middle section of your cover letter. The cover letter is a chance to expand on the knowledge and skills highlighted in your resume with a few very brief (1–2 sentences) stories that paint a picture for the reader of what you would bring to the position to which you are applying. You are not regurgitating what is in your resume, you are expanding upon it and painting a more interesting picture about your qualifications for the reader.

⇒ With the job advertisement in one hand, the results of Exercise #7 in your other hand, and your “Show it” story list above, draft one or two paragraphs that demonstrate to the reader why you would be a good fit for this position. In your writing be sure to convey authenticity and friendliness. *Vary your sentence structure* so not every sentence begins with “I” or “My”. Doing a little research on a company, division, or group can really make the difference between a phrase being timely or falling flat.

**Draft 1 of middle section of cover letter**

Pass the job advertisement and your draft paragraphs to a peer, mentor, or career services professional and ask them the following questions, suggesting ways to make your case even stronger. You can also review the draft yourself, with an eye to the following questions:

- Do I clearly tie my skills and experiences to the needs of the employer?
- Are there words that sound too generic to be meaningful?
- Is my letter simple, clear, genuine, error-free, and convincing?
- Do I clearly and accurately demonstrate my skills, abilities, and interest in the position?

After receiving feedback, draft a second version of the middle section of your cover letter.

**Draft 2 of middle section of cover letter**