

## Writing an Effective Cover Letter

When most people think of job hunting, they tend to focus on preparing their resume. In fact, the cover letter deserves as much attention in an effective job search. The cover letter is a chance, in a narrative form, to introduce yourself, describe your strengths and skills, and express interest in a particular job. More and more, employers are looking at the cover letter as an indicator of your writing skill. A well-written cover letter can help you stand out from the masses. It encourages the potential employer to give consideration to your resume and, ultimately, to interview you for the position.

From a technical standpoint, your cover letter is a way to introduce your formal application for a specific position. Therefore, it is also called a letter of application and is usually accompanied by your resume. A cover letter is comprised of three main elements:

1. **Introductory paragraph.** The first paragraph mentions the position you're interested in and how you've learned of the opening (if indeed you have learned of an opening). If a friend or business contact told you about the position, and you've asked if you can mention his or her name, do so. In this paragraph, you may want to specify why you're applying to this particular company (i.e., because of its outstanding reputation in the field, etc.). This paragraph may be two to four sentences long.

If you are sending a mass mailing to many companies over a large area, along with focusing on the type of position you seek, introduce some of the abilities you have that will be of interest to an employer. If you are sending a letter to a specific company and don't know whether there is an opening, begin by explaining what type of position you want and why you are especially interested in working for that company.

2. **Body.** In the middle two paragraphs that comprise the body of your letter, you should plan to "toot your own horn", honestly of course. Mention two or three of your strengths that you've developed over time that directly relate to the position you want. Use examples from your educational background and work experience where you've improved those strengths.

Also make mention of other qualities that suggest you're a highly desirable employee. Are you energetic, enthusiastic, detail oriented, a fast learner? Choose adjectives that are applicable to the position you want. Use the body of your cover letter to make a strong connection with the employer.

3. **Closing.** Remember the overall purpose of sending your cover letter and resume: to obtain an interview. Be sure to indicate specifically and assertively what you want the employer to do next. "I'd like to arrange an interview at your earliest convenience" is a clear statement. Make mention of how and where you can be reached, or indicate that you'll call the employer on a specific day or in a week's time. The tone should be polite yet explicit regarding what you expect the next step in the process to be.

### **Tips for Writing Your Cover Letter**

1. Your cover letter is your introduction to a potential employer or graduate chair. It presents you and your accompanying documents (application, resume, etc.) It's your opportunity to put your best foot forward in writing. Show your enthusiasm for a particular job or program and let the reader know you have confidence in your potential.
2. Always send a cover letter with your resume. Why pass up the opportunity to present your best qualities? That's what a cover letter can do. It puts your resume in context, drawing attention to your strengths and best attributes. It gives you a chance to show your personality in a way that the strictly formatted resume doesn't allow you. At its most basic level, it allows you to demonstrate your writing skills. Most important, it serves as an introduction to your resume, a teaser that encourages the reader to take the time and learn more about you.
3. Personalize your cover letter. If you address your letter to a specific individual rather than "Dear Sir", "To Whom It May Concern", or "Human Resources Department", your letter has a much better chance of being read. To get the name of an individual, call the company for information, check the library for trade publications and reference materials that list company officers, search the Internet for company information, or do your best to find out from a personal contact that may have the inside scoop. Invest your energy in doing solid research to better aim your cover letter at a target person who can make a hiring decision.
4. Make sure your letter looks professional. Type your letter, and be sure to spell-check it. Typos, misspellings, grammatical errors, and cross-outs immediately say to the reader that you lack written communication skills and don't pay attention to detail. If you are unsure of your writing abilities, ask a professor, coworker, or friend to proofread your work. Even the best writers have editors; enlist several of your own.
5. Keep your letter to one page. Your cover letter should be concise but thorough. The length will depend on the amount of content you have to convey, but a total of three to six paragraphs should allow you to cover the most important points. Devote one paragraph to each key thought; short paragraphs (no more than four sentences to five sentences) make your letter easy to read.
6. Familiarize yourself with standard letter format. Follow standard rules for spacing and punctuation. Demonstrate your written communication skills by creating a professional-looking and professional-sounding letter. If you are unsure of proper letter format, use the sample letter below. Many use the full-block format, as used in the sample letter.
7. Make your cover letter scannable and/or emailable. Today's cover letters are often read not only by humans but also by computers. They are scanned into applicant databases along with resumes. To ensure proper scanning of your letter, use black type on white or off-white paper. Choose an easy-to-read typeface such as Times New Roman or Arial in

an 11 or 12 point font. Avoid graphics, bold and italic type, and underlining. Mail your letter and resume paper clipped, not stapled, unfolded in a 9"x12" envelope or email it directly in the message space.

## Sample Cover Letter

September 2, 2005

Mr. Glenn Severance  
Director of Human Resources  
Acme Corporation  
802 Bishop Street  
Honolulu, HI 96821

Dear Mr. Severance,

Janine Hudson of your Marketing Department recently informed me of the opening for a recruiter with your company. I believe that my educational background and my experience in business make me a strong candidate for the position. I have attached my resume for your review and appreciate your consideration.

I recently graduated from University of Hawai'i-West O'ahu with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. I have up-to-date knowledge in the field, having completed courses in human resources, management, and finance. The capstone to my program was a 120 hour practicum I completed with Central Pacific Bank where I assisted in the human resources and loan departments. I enjoyed developing skills and knowledge in the area of human resources and now want to pursue a position in that field.

As a result of my previous work experience, I am a motivated coordinator with excellent communication skills. My attention to detail and familiarity with office procedures have served me well in the workplace. I am an energetic and enthusiastic worker with a positive approach to providing customer service and believe my strengths will be an asset to your company.

I look forward to talking with you further about the skills, strengths, and experiences I might bring to your company. I will contact you next week to hear your thoughts. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

*Langdon Kenney*

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