

Cover Letters

The cover letter is your initial contact with a potential employer. By creating a strong first impression, your chances of having your application taken seriously increases substantially.

A cover letter is an essential part of any job application and should always accompany your CV or resume. It represents you and conveys a professional image in the employer's mind. An effective cover letter highlights and markets your skills, abilities and relevant experiences which provides an important link to your CV and to the employer's needs. A well written cover letter will entice the reader into wanting to know more about you.

The cover letter amplifies those aspects of the CV most relevant to the job in question. It must make the right impression and encourage the employer to not only look at your CV but read it with interest. The cover letter introduces your CV and therefore you. It needs to stand out from other cover letters.

*Your letter must tell the employer that you are interested in the industry, interested in their particular firm and interested in the firm. The key questions about the applicant in every employer's mind when they read a job application are: **can, will and do they really want to do the job?***

Your Strategy – Where to Start?

1. Know the Product

You are selling... you. A good salesperson can instantly articulate the features and benefits of his or her product. In order to do this well you need to clearly identify what you are offering as a potential employee to an employer and how your skills would be of benefit to the employer.

2. Know the Market

Market also means targeting your audience.... in this case, your readers – potential employers. Identify the person who has the power to hire you. Most personnel directors have the power to reject candidates but not to hire them! Never mass produce a cover letter. Write a personalised original letter to accompany every CV you send.

3. Know How to Research the Market

How do you know what an employer's needs are?
Research. Start with the duties listed in the job ad, if you have one. If you are applying for unadvertised positions you will want to learn everything you can about the industry and the organisations in which you are interested.
For a well-targeted, effective CV and cover letter, you'll need to do some:
Occupational research
Company research
Industry research



The Careers Resource Library is the best place to start your research. Understanding job requirements and being able to make the match between what the employer needs and what you can offer is crucial, not only to a good CV or cover letter but to the entire job search process.

4. Know How to Package the Product for the Desired Market

Once you know your product (you) and your market (potential employer) you will have a sense of how to package, or tailor your product for the market. Consider what you can do to make your package (cover letter, CV) stand out from the rest by highlighting skills that you know will be needed by the potential employer and by using industry-specific language and terms.

What to Say

Each letter should be customised. Address it to a person not an organisation. As you write your letter imagine yourself in a face-to-face conversation with a real person. Your task is to convince this person that you have the skills, interest, energy and enthusiasm to do the job. Focus on the main skills and experience that the employer asks for. Draw the employer's attention to the skills and personal qualities that you will bring to the job. A letter that lacks personal details and fails to address the selection

criteria will not engage the employer's interest and will probably be rejected.

Your letter should be clear, crisp, concise, polite and business-like. Avoid language that is overly formal, legalistic or flowery. Sentences should be short and to the point. Use strong verbs that demonstrate action and accomplishment e.g. organised, supervised, co-ordinated.

A good cover letter should include the following information.

Your Details

Your name, address and telephone number (include Email address if relevant).

The Date

The date you are sending out the letter (spell out the 'month' i.e. 9 January 2001).

Employer Details

The name and title of the person, the company (address) to whom you are writing. Target your letter to department heads and hiring managers. If necessary telephone the company to ensure you have the correct spelling of the person's name and title.

Salutation

'Dear' is the usual salutation, followed by their title, 'Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr' etc. and then the family name or surname. Avoid 'Dear Sir/Madam' or 'To whom it may concern' ... if at all possible. Avoid using the first name in a formal letter unless you have personally spoken with or been introduced to the person and first names were used.

Opening Paragraph

Explain why you are writing. If applying for a job, give the job title and any job reference numbers. Name the source of your information e.g. Careers Advisory Service noticeboard, 'Current Vacancies', 'Evening Post', a personal contact etc. Include a strong positive statement about yourself and your qualifications, for example: "your advertisement for a policy analyst seems to match my qualifications exactly."

If interested in a summer position or an information interview, make this clear. Someone may have referred you to that particular company, you may have a contact there or perhaps you spoke to someone as part of an information gathering exercise to help you decide whether or not to apply for the position. Grab the reader's attention, mention that person by name. You will immediately become less two dimensional to the reader as you now have something in common.

Second and Third Paragraphs

Explain why you want the job and how your skills and experience qualify you for it. Your research should have made you aware of what career opportunities exist within the company and how they relate to your career goals. Briefly describe your current situation – final year student ... due to complete a degree in ... graduating December 2001, etc.

If the job does not have a direct link with your degree and courses studied, then give a convincing explanation e.g. if you are applying for a marketing positions and your degree is in English Literature, then you need to explain why you are interested in Marketing, give evidence of how genuine and developed that interest is, identify any skills a degree in English develops that would transfer to a marketing career.

The covering letter is an opportunity to demonstrate your knowledge of the company, the industry, markets and the economic climate in which it operates. If there is anything about you in terms of your skills, interests, aptitude or experience that make you unique, then the covering letter is the place to bring this to the employer's attention. Remember to keep the emphasis on what you can offer the company – not on what they can offer you.

Closing Paragraph

The closing paragraph must be positive. Request an opportunity to discuss your application in an interview and state your willingness to provide further details. If there are any restrictions on when you would be available for an interview, make this clear. An employer will be put off if they find it difficult to contact you. If appropriate, state that you intend to follow up the applications, but be clear about when and how you will do this. This is crucial where the cover letter is part of an unsolicited application. Close by thanking the reader for their time and consideration.

Finally....

The cover letter usually closes with "Yours sincerely". Type your name leaving room above it for your signature (usually 6 line spaces).

Don't forget to enclose materials as required, for example, CV, Testimonial, Academic Transcript and Company Application Form.



Appearance and Layout

Make your letters attractive to read.

Your letter should be of a professional quality, typed or word processed unless the employer indicates otherwise. Use good quality paper – A4 watermark 90-100 gsm. Pay attention to print quality, laser printed text is preferable. Coloured paper or ink should be used with care. Many applications are photocopied and colours such as red and dark colours photocopy badly.

No creases, smudges or errors! Do not fold your letter and CV. Print on one side only. Place it flat in an A4 envelope.

Experiments with graphics should be avoided unless you are fairly confident of your skill in this area. Employers often look for evidence of creativity or genuine talent in a well designed and attractive application. Applications for marketing, advertising or design positions are good examples of where cover letters need to really stand out.

Checklist

- Is the opening of the letter strong, positive and interesting?
- Is it clear, crisp, concise and one page?
- Is it professional, attractively presented and easy-to-read?
- Have I checked each statement for spelling and grammar, clarity and impact?
- Does key information required by the employer stand out?
- Is my interest in the job and knowledge of the organisation clear to the employer?
- Have you ended the letter in a positive and pro-active manner?
- Have you made it clear where, and how, you can be contacted?
- Have you included all relevant material i.e. CV, academic transcript etc
- Have you remembered to sign it?

Proof Read! – Proof Read! – Proof Read!

--- then have someone else

Proof Read!

Further Reading

The following publications have useful tips for letter writing and display a range of sample cover letters. Reference copies of the books are available for perusal at Career Development and Employment, 14 Kelburn Parade.

- ***The Essential CV Survival Guide***
- Doug Pitcher
- ***175 High Impact Cover Letters***
- Richard H. Beatty
- ***The Resume Solution***
- David Swanson
- ***Job Hunting for Dummies***
- Marx Messmer
- ***I Can Do That***
- Malcolm Hornby
- ***A Job Hunter's Guide***
- Frank Sligo
- ***How to Market Yourself***
- Ian Phillipson
- ***The Damn Good Resume Guide***
- Yana Parker

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*Assistance with career planning and
job searching techniques is available
from Vic Careers staff.*



FORMAT OF A COVER LETTER

