Career Central™ Advice

Why a Cover Letter?

Cover letters are the first opportunity to selling yourself as the product.

Why the fuss?

Hands down: Cover letters are an integral part of your online or in person résumé.

But why a cover letter if you already have a résumé? Simply put: The cover letter explains why you believe you are a good fit for the position, while the résumé proves how you are qualified for the position through your skills and experience.

Well-written cover letters are your first opportunity to sell yourself, create an impression, and separate yourself from the competition. They introduce you and your résumé, and help determine whether you make it to the interview stage. Some employers won't even read a résumé without a cover letter.

Introduction, overview, and summary.

Your cover letter puts your skills into context. It is the part of your résumé where you have the employer's full attention to quickly explain how all those skills and accomplishments neatly organized in your résumé will make you the best fit of all candidates for the company.

The tone should be businesslike, yet engaging and enthusiastic. Get to the point right after the salutation: State why you are writing, the position you're interested in, and what makes you the best candidate. Include how you learned of the position, add your degree and school, and, as appropriate, your current position and relevant extracurricular activities. Close with a "Thank you." and a request for an interview.

Keep it professional: Be brief, pertinent, neat, and accurate. You only have about three or four short paragraphs on one page to make your case.

Looks count on paper.

Cover letters should be inviting to the eye. Use an easy-to-read typeface, such as Helvetica, Arial, or Times, in 10-point or 12-point size. Avoid using all boldface, all italics, or all capital letters. Align type flush left and ragged right for easiest reading. Use black ink on high-grade white or ivory letterhead stationery.

Place your full address and contact info at the top left, followed by a line space, the date, another full line space, the employer's name, company, and full address, another line space, and salutation. Follow that with another line space and then the body of your letter. Leave a line space between paragraphs, without any indentation. Then one more line space, and conclude your letter with "Sincerely," on a line of its own, leaving sufficient space below for your penned full signature, just above your typed full name.

Whenever possible, address your letter to a specific person, not "To Whom It May Concern". If addressing "Robert Smith", use "Dear Mr. Smith:" or "Dear Sir:" with a colon as a salutation; not "Dear Robert,"; not "Hi, Bob!"

If you can't identify the right person, then say "Human Resources Director" or "Director/Manager of [specific department]", or "Dear Recruiter".

Finessing the details.

Research the company so each cover letter is company-specific. Use straightforward language, active not passive words, good grammar, and accurate spelling. No slang, texting abbreviations, or other symbols.

Read your letter through for clarity. Remember, you're selling "you" and you don't have more than a few moments of an employer's time to do that, so don't use generic language such as "I like to work with people."

Hone your sentences carefully so each word counts. You need to keep the prospective employer's attention.

Finally, place your finished cover letter carefully on top of your résumé. Mail them together unfolded in a high-quality 9 x 12" white envelope, instead of the standard matching #10, for greater impact.

in a nutshell:

Cover letters are sales letters, so make sure your message and medium are both clear and clean:

- **Use plain quality stationery**
- **Personalize your letter**
- **Address the specific job and give qualification specifics**
- **Focus on what you can offer**
- **Be direct, relevant, and brief**
- **Don't rehash your résumé; highlight major points**
- **Proof, proof, proof for typos and accuracy; and don't lie**
- **Include a "Thank you," request an interview, then follow up**

Remember, your cover letter is the key to your interview. It must be perfect!

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