

Cover Letter and Other Business Correspondence

6. Cover Letter and Other Business Correspondence

General Information

Definition of a Cover Letter

Both academic and non-academic cover letter is the first contact between you and the prospective employer. This is your first (and last) chance to make a good first impression! It is your business card and in that allows you to get more personal and to distinguish yourself from the other applicants. You have the chance to demonstrate your individuality and personality.

The goal of a cover letter is to open the door for you to get an interview, and eventually the job! It should answer the following questions:

- Why should I consider you a qualified candidate?
- What qualifications and skills do you bring to the company/university that I could immediately benefit from? How does that fit overall into the environment and into the department?
- How much energy are you prepared to put into the application procedure to get hired?

Layout of Cover Letters

- Use 8.5-by-11-inch paper.
- You may use white or ivory paper.
- One inch for each margin is ideal. This also forces you to keep it short, simple, and concise. Should you really need more space, you can have 0.8 inches for the upper, the lower, and the right margin. The left margin should always remain one inch wide.
- Use single spacing between the lines within one paragraph. Use double spacing between two paragraphs.
- You may use block or left-aligned format.

General Tips on how to write a Cover Letter

- Never use a general cover letter, or a template. Always tailor your cover letter to the prospective employer and her needs!
- Do research on the company/university and demonstrate this knowledge.
- Highlight the specific skills that match the requirements of the job. Go beyond repeating what is already written in your résumé.
- There must be no spelling or grammar mistakes. Ask someone you trust to review your cover letter for spelling, syntax, and grammar.
- Ask this person also about your wording and about the impression your cover letter creates.
- Make only controlled use of the pronoun "I".

Non-Academic Cover Letter

Anatomy of Non-Academic Cover Letters

- Heading.
- The date of the letter.
- The name, title and address of the person you are writing to.
- Salutation.
- Paragraphs 1 to 4.
- Final line.
- Closing.
- Enclosing line.

Heading

Your name and contact details come first. You are free in the format, i.e. you may do this as a header, left aligned, or right aligned. This is completely up to you. However, as with the résumé, you provide your name, address, telephone number, and e-mail. Do not furnish your current work number or e-mail-address! You may include your cell phone number and fax number. To make your application material most consistent, you may want to use the same heading as in the résumé.

Date of your letter

The date should appear two lines beneath your address. It should be left aligned. Write out the date, for example: December 15, 2004.

Name, title and address of the person you are writing to

If not indicated in the job ad, always try to find out the name of the addressee. This shows the effort you put into the application. You can call the reception or look up the name in the company's directory. Start the addressee section two lines beneath the date.

First: Name of the addressee, title of the addressee
Second: Name of the company
Third: Address of the company: Street
 Address of the company: City, State, Zip Code

Salutation:

The salutation appears two lines beneath the address of the company as 'Dear Mr. XXX' or 'Dear Ms. XXX', followed by a colon. If cannot find out the name of the addressee, you have to use a general salutation. Use greetings such as 'Dear Hiring Manager', or 'Good Morning' to make it more personal. Avoid greetings such as 'Dear Sir or Madam' or 'To whom it may concern'.

Paragraph 1

State the goal of your letter and name the specific position for which you are applying. Also indicate where you found out about the job. Very importantly, in this paragraph, demonstrate your knowledge of the company (or industry). Do this powerfully, i.e. in such a way that you catch the reader's attention.

Paragraph 2 and 3

Talk briefly about your background. Also, list and elaborate on those accomplishments that match the requirements of the job most, and briefly describe them. This is like a sales pitch: highlight the most attractive and persuasive accomplishments that separate you from other applicants and that make you the unique candidate. You may only need one middle paragraph.

Important: Answer the prospective employer's implicit question: Why should I be interested in you? Very clearly relate yourself to the company and how you can make a difference. What precisely can you do for the company? How can you solve your potential employer's problem? How can you solve this problem better than any of your competitors? You can draw on any kind of experience, whether paid or unpaid. However, never state whether the work was paid or unpaid volunteer work.

Paragraph 2 and 3 should arouse enough interest in getting to know you better and personally. They should also create the desire to invite you for an interview.

Paragraph 4

Take the initiative. Request action and ask for an interview. Suggest a time to meet, or let the prospective employer know when you will call.

Final line

Always thank the reader, i.e. your potential employer, for the time and consideration.

The closing

It appears two lines beneath the last line. Keep it simple, 'sincerely' is enough. Type your name four lines under 'sincerely'. Your signature

appears between 'sincerely' and your printed name.

Enclosure line

Two lines beneath your printed name you may indicate your enclosure, which in most cases will be the résumé. You will indicate this as follows: Encl.: Résumé.

REMEMBER: A cover letter should not contain more than 4 main paragraphs!

Academic Cover Letter

General Information

This letter has purposes similar to those for a business job. However, its content may differ significantly in both quantity and kind. Academic cover letters should contain information about your academic and professional achievements that are important to the particular job position and institution. The academic cover letter can be up to 2 pages long (it may contain 5 to 7 paragraphs).

Anatomy of Cover Letters

- Heading.
- The date of the letter.
- The name, title and address of the person you are writing to.
- Salutation.
- First paragraph.
- Middle paragraphs.
- Final paragraph.
- Sign off. Your signature.

Heading

Your name and contact detail comes first. You are free in the format, i.e. you may do this as a header, left aligned, or right aligned. This is completely up to you. However, as with the résumé, you provide your name, address, telephone number, and e-mail. Do not furnish your current work number or e-mail-address! You may include your cell phone number and fax number. To make your application material most consistent, you may want to use the same heading as in the CV.

Date of your letter

The date should appear two lines beneath your address. It should be left aligned. Write out the date, for example: December 15, 2004.

Name, title and address of the person you are writing to

If not indicated in the job ad, always try to find out the name of the addressee. This shows the effort you put into the application. You can call the reception or look up the name in the company's directory. Start the addressee section two lines beneath the date.

First: Name of the addressee, title of the addressee or Search
 Committee
Second: Name of the university
Third: Address of the university: Street
 Address of the university: City, State, Zip Code

Salutation

Use "Dear Dr. _____:" or "Dear Professor _____:" if addressing letter to individual in academic field.

Use "Dear Committee Members:" if addressing letter to a search committee.

First Paragraph

Mention which position you are applying for and where you found it. Use a contact's name if someone has referred you to apply for the position. Mention your degree as well as your major and, if you have not finished yet, state the expected finish date. Since this is the opening paragraph of your cover letter, you should briefly state why you are a strong candidate for the position.

Middle Paragraphs (paragraphs 3 to 5)

This is the most important part of your letter and should make a connection between your CV and the job requirements of the position. This is your chance to show how you fit their qualifications. Highlight in some detail your accomplishments during your graduate education in research, your teaching experience, departmental service, and so on.

Indicate your academic fields of study but tailor this section so that you place emphasis on those parts of your graduate training that match the requirements of the advertised position.

Summarize your past research and plans for future research. (Where do you expect your research to go after the completion of your dissertation and the publication that will follow from it?)

State your teaching experience and interests.

Emphasize certain parts of your credentials and talents for certain jobs. I.e. graduate degree-granting institutions will be more interested in research than teaching and most other institutions will be primarily interested in teaching experience and approach.

In discussing your work, note the recognition it has received in the form of competitive grants, awards, publications in journals, and/or presentations at major conferences.

Briefly discuss how you might fit into the department and the institutional community-at-large.

Final Paragraph

List the materials that you enclosed (CV, dissertation abstract, transcripts, teaching portfolio, writing samples, etc.) and what information you will send separately, such as letters of recommendation. You can also offer to provide additional information upon request.

Mention how you can be contacted by including a phone number. You can indicate your availability for an interview by mentioning upcoming conferences that you will be attending or future dates of campus visits. Always thank the addressee for their time and consideration.

The Thank You Note

After having had a phone or face-to-face interview, you always send a so-called thank you note. However, this letter contains more than a simple thank you. It builds on the conversation you had with the prospective employer. There are several ways of doing this:

- During the conversation, you have realized that a specific issue was of major concern to the employer. You can comment on that.
- You left the interview and realized that there is some more valuable information you could add, that might help the prospective employer to get a more precise picture of you and therefore it might help them to make a decision for you.
- You want to emphasize one of your unique skills and/or experience, which make an immediate difference to the employer.

References

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Heiberger MM, Vick JM (2001). The Academic Job Search Handbook, 3rd Edition. PENN, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia.

Hume K. (2005). *Surviving Your Academic Job Hunt. Advice For Humanities PhDs.* Palgrave Macmillan.