Writing a Cover Letter

What is a cover letter?

A cover letter introduces you and your resume to potential employers. It is often the first document employers see, so it usually generates the first impression that they get of you and your abilities (Purdue University, 2008). It should grab the employer’s attention, and answer the question “why should I hire you for this position?” (Trinity College, n.d.). It serves to highlight aspects of your résumé that are of particular importance to your prospective position, and allows you to embellish on experiences and attributes that show you are the right fit for the job.

What is the purpose of a cover letter?

Generally, your cover letter, along with your résumé, makes up the sales pitch that you use to convince your potential employers of your worth to the organization. It should highlight your individuality: what in particular that makes you different and potentially valuable to the organization. It should get the reader’s attention, and convince him or her to schedule an interview. It should demonstrate knowledge about the organization and evidence that you have done your homework. Finally, it should show that you are tailoring the documents you send for each position to that particular company, rather than sending out generic form letters—this goes a long way to demonstrating real interest in the position (Purdue University, 2008).

Formatting your cover letter

See our Cover Letter Template to get a sense of what your cover letter should look like and the information that should go in each paragraph.

Spacing

You should single-space your letter, putting a double-space in the following places: between the inside address and the salutation; between the salutation and the body of the letter; between the body of the letter and the signature block; and between the signature block and the enclosure reference.

Margins

Your top and side margins should be equal, while the bottom margin should be about one and a half times as large as the other margins. They should make your letter look balanced on the page (Purdue University, 2008).

Placement of text

You can align your return address and signature block with either the left or the right margins. However, be consistent—if you put one on the left, put them both there.

If you line up both address and signature block with the left margin, you’ll probably want your
paragraphs to be flush left too. This lets you fit more on the page. Most prospective employers prefer cover letters to be one page, so this can help fit everything in (Purdue University, 2008).

**Presentation and style of the cover letter**

Here are some things to keep in mind when deciding on the style of your cover letter:

- Be certain that your letter contains no typos and no grammatical or spelling errors. These errors make a letter appear very unprofessional, and are the cause of many outright rejections. The idea is that if you make errors like these when applying for a job, you will be prone to error on the job as well.
- If you adopt a formal tone, the professionalism of the letter will be heightened.
- Use technical terminology where appropriate; you may find examples of such terminology in the job posting.
- Do not use contractions (can’t, won’t, etc.)
- As much as you can, avoid using “I”, “me”, and “my”—instead, emphasize “you”. When you have to use personal pronouns, try to put them in the middle of the sentence, reserving the subject of the sentence for your experiences and achievements. Overuse of personal pronouns can project an image of self-centeredness, which is counterproductive.
- As in your resume, use action verbs and phrases as much as possible, and never use the passive voice.
- You are trying to sound confident, but not “full of yourself.” Once you have a draft of your letter, read it carefully and try to determine the image you are projecting with it. Make sure that you sound the way you intend to (Purdue University, 2008; Trinity College, n.d.).