

Selling Yourself on Paper – The Cover Letter



The cover letter is your formal introduction to a prospective employer—a must when mailing any resume. Because it is generally the first piece read, it can mean the difference between landing an interview and landing in the rejection pile. So, how do you entice the employer to read your resume? What type of information do you include in a cover letter?

These are some of the questions you must answer as you continue on the road to re-employment. This information sheet will help you understand the different types of cover letters and outline some effective tips to capture the reader's attention.

Achieving Interest

To gain access to the employer, you must draft a cover letter that is brief and interesting. The content should not be a carbon copy of your resume, but instead highlight what you can do for the employer. It is difficult to create a totally different letter for each job you apply for, so make it versatile. In this way, you can create one basic letter that can be adapted for each employer reading it. Never write a form just to be duplicated and sent out.

Presenting Yourself Two Ways

There are two basic types of cover letters: a letter of application and a letter of inquiry. The **letter of application** is targeted toward a specific job advertisement. When drafting this letter, be certain to outline the skills and accomplishments that best meet the company's needs. Some employers suggest using terms or language from the ad to make this description more effective.

The **letter of inquiry** is a marketing tool, used to gain an informational interview from a company or to correspond with a networking contact. These letters should be sent after you have conducted some research on your career interests, the job market and specific companies in your area that may be hiring.

Creating the Right Impression

No matter what type of letter you're sending, the key is to get the interview! Here are ten things to keep in mind when drafting either type of cover letter:

- **Write each letter to a specific job opening.** There's no such thing as a "one size fits all" letter. Each job you apply for is different. Adapt your letter to show how you meet the needs of a given job. Be sure to refer to the specific job in the first few sentences so that the reader knows the job for which you are applying.
- **Describe your skills as they relate to the job.** Saying you worked for a company in a specific job title doesn't mean the reader will make the connection between you, your previous job, and the job in question. It often helps to tie your experience to your skills, directly relating them to the job description.
- **Make it personal.** Address your letter to a specific person in the company. This is especially important in a letter of inquiry. If you do not have a contact, call and ask for one. Also, use a comma after the name, it's more personal.
- **Create a catchy opening sentence.** When people read letters, they scan them for content. Attention grabbing first sentences—describing why you're the best person for the job or addressing the interests of the business—will get the employer to continue reading.
- **Include vital information.** Your name, address and telephone number (including area code) should be easily visible on every cover letter you send out. It will be the first thing the reader looks for when trying to contact you.
- **Type and proofread your cover letter before sending it out.** Your cover letter creates an impression of you. If you make errors, it may reflect how employers view you. If your letter is neat and professional, the employer will believe you are too.

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- **Be brief.** Some employers receive cover letters and resumes daily, so they want to know about you without having to read a lot of unnecessary information. Use action words and active sentences to describe your accomplishments. Your letter should also be limited to one page—containing three or four paragraphs. (See suggestions for paragraph content below.)
- **Be confident, creative and enthusiastic!** Next to your resume, your cover letter is your best way to sell yourself on paper. In addition to illustrating the benefits of hiring you, your cover letter should also let your personality come through.
- **Keep a copy of every cover letter you send out.** Past letters will make your job search and follow-up go more smoothly.
- **Request a response or an interview.** Your cover letter is written to get you an interview, so ask for one!

Making the Commitment

The content of your letter plays an important role in your interview prospects. So, make it work for you! DCS's Job Search Journal, Resume Guide and other publications are available in this One-Stop Career Center. These publications include more writing tips and effective sample letters.

Mr. John Watt
XYZ Electronics, Inc.
345 Circuit St.
Anytown, MA 12345

Dear Mr. Watt,

First Paragraph—State the reason for the letter, the specific position or type of work for which you are applying and indicate from which resource (placement center, news media, friend, etc.) you learned about the opening.

Second Paragraph—Explain why you are interested in the position, the company, etc., and what you can do for the employer. If you are a recent graduate, explain how your academic background makes you a qualified candidate. If you have had some practical work experience, point out your specific achievements or unique qualifications. Remember—do not copy information directly from your resume.

Third Paragraph—Refer the reader to the enclosed resume or application which summarizes your qualifications and training. (This can also be included at the end of the second paragraph.)

Final Paragraph—Indicate your desire for a personal interview and your flexibility as to the time and place. Include your phone number and offer any assistance to help obtain a speedy response. Close with a statement or a question to encourage a response. For example, state that you will call on a certain date to set up an interview.

Regards,

John Q. Public

An equal opportunity employer/program. Auxiliary aids and services are available upon request to individuals with disabilities. For hearing impaired relay services, call 1-800-439-0183 or 711.