

WRITING COVER LETTERS

A cover letter is an introduction, a sales pitch, and a proposal for further action all in one. Cover letters should not summarize your resume, but should highlight the aspects of your background that are most relevant to the reader. A cover letter also demonstrates that you can organize your thoughts and express yourself clearly and appropriately—it reflects your communication skills and, to some extent, your personality.

Cover letters are a maximum of one page in length and are comprised of four paragraphs:

- Details about why you are writing and who you are.
- Evidence from your resume that demonstrates that you have the skills called for in the job description.
- An explanation of why you want to work for a company.
- A concluding proposal for further action.

Five Things to Consider Before You Write

If you do not know what to write after, “Dear Mr. or Ms. So-and-So,” take a step back and put some more thought into your cover letter. Ask yourself the following questions to build a foundation for your letter, and the actual writing will go more smoothly:

1. What does the prospective employer need?

Closely examine the job description and make a list of skills, knowledge, and experiences that are called for in it.

2. What are your objectives?

Are you applying for a specific job, or writing to inquire about employment opportunities that have not been posted? You should clearly state your objective in the first paragraph.

3. What are three to five qualities that you can bring to this employer or job?

If you are responding to a job listing, choose qualities that match the job requirements. Reference skills, tasks, and responsibilities using words similar to those in the job posting. If you are inquiring about opportunities at the company in general, think of which skills, knowledge, and experiences would typically be valued. Visit the company’s website to help determine these qualities.

4. How can you match your experience to the job?

Name at least two of your specific accomplishments, projects, or jobs that support the qualities you identified in question 3.

5. Why do you want to work for this particular organization or person?

What do you know about them? How do their products or services, philosophy, mission, organizational culture,

goals, and needs relate to your background, values, and objectives? Has the company been in the news lately or completed a project related to something you've studied? If yes, mention that connection. You want to tell the company why you want to work for them specifically. Use supporting, specific facts.

Contact Information

Include a contact name from the company in both the address and salutation of your cover letter. The salutation should never include a first name, but should read, "Dear Mr. Smith" or "Dear Ms. Smith." Use Ms. rather than Mrs. or Miss because it applies to any woman, regardless of marital status, whereas other abbreviations are more specific and may be offensive.

Job postings may or may not provide a contact name. Scroll down to the bottom of the posting to see if a contact is listed. If not, you can use the Business Card database on one of the computers in the CDC lobby. Please ask a CDC staff member for assistance. You can also try to locate a department head/hiring manager from the company's website or Human Resources department, through LinkedIn, or through Hoover's Company Profiles, an online database accessible from the **Gordon Library** website, or through Career Search located on Job Finder. When all else fails, use, "Dear Hiring Manager."

Sections of a Cover Letter

Here's what goes into each of the four main sections of a cover letter when applying for a specific job:

Paragraph 1: The Opening

This is where you tell employers who you are, why you are writing, and how you heard about the organization or position.

- The "who you are" is a brief introduction of yourself with a phrase like, "I am a senior at Worcester Poly-

technic Institute (WPI) graduating in May with a major in biology." Be sure to include your degree, major, year, and the fact that you are a WPI student.

- The "why you are writing" is where you mention what position you are applying for, or, if there is no specific position opening, your job objective.
- The "how you heard about the organization," is a brief statement of how you found out about the position or company. You might say, "I saw your listing for a Mechanical Designer at the Career Development Center at Worcester Polytechnic Institute," or, "I read about the expansion of your East Coast operations in the New York Times and am interested in discussing entry-level opportunities you might have available." If someone referred you to the job opening, or you learned about the position from a company representative at a career fair, you should mention their name and department as well.

Paragraph 2: The Sales/Matching Pitch

Before you write this section, read the job description carefully. Reflect on and highlight the key qualifications and skills sought in a candidate. Next, look at your resume and identify in writing which projects, experiences, or activities demonstrate these particular qualities. For example, instead of writing, "I have excellent collaboration skills," write, "Through my extensive project work at WPI, where students work together to solve real-world problems, I have gained excellent collaboration skills." This is a great way to share less tangible skills you acquired through project and leadership experiences. You can also discuss and elaborate on a specific project listed on your resume. Providing evidence that you have the skills the employer is looking for is much more compelling than just saying that you have these skills without proof. Begin or end this paragraph with a summary statement showing how your qualifications match the job requirements.

Paragraph 3: Compliment the Company

This is the “why I want to work for your company” section of your letter. It’s where you flatter the reader a bit by commenting on something positive about the organization and describing why you want to work there. You can mention the organization’s reputation, sales record, size, corporate culture, management philosophy, or anything else in which they take pride. Prospective employers like to know that you have chosen them for a reason and that they are not just one of hundreds of companies you’re writing to as part of a mass mailing. Be sure your flattery is genuine and specific. Look at the company’s website and LinkedIn page, and utilize the Gordon Library Resources, for information to reference.

Paragraph 4: The Request for Further Action

This final section of a cover letter not only thanks the employer for taking the time to read your letter and consider you as a job candidate, but also discusses next steps. You should suggest how to proceed, usually by stating that you will call or email the employer to follow up and request a meeting. Always include your email address and phone number.

Close your letter with “Sincerely” or “Best Regards” and your signature (or your first and last name if submitting electronically).

Once you have written the letter, go back and check for typos, misspellings, and grammatical errors.

- Please come to walk in hours or schedule an appointment with the CDC to have your cover letter critiqued. Bring a paper copy of your cover letter and the job description.
- For more information about Cover Letter Writing see the CDC website or log in to your Job Finder account and watch the Cover Letter Podcast.

Sending a Cover Letter via Email

There are two ways to email your resume and cover letter to a company. Either option is acceptable:

- **Option 1:** Attach the cover letter and resume as two separate documents to the email. Write a brief note within the body of the email explaining why you are writing (i.e., to apply for X position, to inquire about opportunities related to Y). Last, indicate that your resume and cover letter are attached.
- **Option 2:** Attach the resume only to the email. Copy and paste the text of your cover letter directly into the body of the email, beginning with, “Dear Mr./Mrs.”

You should follow the application process requested by the employer. Keep easily accessible copies of all letters you mail, fax, or email, along with a log of when you sent the letters so that you can follow up on them.

Other Types of Letters

Inquiry Letters

An inquiry letter is a request for information. You might write one to inquire about opportunities for an internship or full-time position, request a company’s annual report or brochure, or request the names of people to whom you can direct further inquiries. For example, you may write to the local chapter of your professional organization to request the names of two or three members who can give you information on employment prospects in a particular field. When writing a letter to inquire about potential internships or full-time opportunities, the format is very similar to a cover letter, except you will provide evidence of the skills and qualities you think they would desire and demonstrate what you can do for the company.

Thank You Letters

You should always send a thank you letter after you have had an informational or job interview. It shows that you are still interested in a position, enables you to add information you might have previously forgotten, and indicates that you are well-mannered and professional. Thank you letters can also help set you apart from other candidates. For more information about how to write a thank you note, see the CDC's **Thank You Note Writing Cheat Sheet**. Remember to send a thank you letter after any of the following interactions:

- Interview
- Company Information Session
- Career Fair
- Conference
- Alumni networking even

Follow-up Letters

A follow-up letter is one that you might send after a thank you letter if you have not heard back from an employer in a set amount of time, generally two weeks. It should be polite and positive, restating your interest in a position and asking for a report on the status of the selection process. You may also send a follow-up letter to clarify a specific aspect of your interaction with the employer. Instead of sending a follow-up letter you may also call the employer directly. A follow-up phone call demonstrates your interest and provides an opportunity for an immediate and personalized response to your request.

Acknowledgement Letters

An acknowledgement letter is used to formally accept or reject a job offer. If you are accepting an offer, you should indicate the date you are available to begin work. After you accept an offer, you should also send letters of regret to any other employers who are still considering you for employment. This is a courtesy to these employers as well as an opportunity to thank them for their time and interest.

Reference Letters

Reference letters are less commonly used today than in the past, with the exception of certain fields such as education, nursing, and library science. However, if you do have reference letters, you should bring them to interviews in case they are requested.

If you are required to get reference letters, keep in mind that the best ones are specific. They should focus on a specific accomplishment of yours from a previous job or experience and should avoid broad, general statements that could easily apply to most applicants. You can help by providing your references with a summary description of suggested items they might write about. For example, if you are using a professor for a reference, you might give them a list of projects or papers you've done for them with their original feedback.

Sample Cover Letter

Please avoid repeating the exact language used in this sample. Instead, try to be creative and use language that conveys your uniqueness and communication style.

100 Institute Road, Box 1234
Worcester, MA 01609

August 22, 2010

Ms. Dianne C. Strand
Manager of Human Resources
Atlantic Coast Industries, Inc.
2900 Virginia Beach Boulevard
Virginia Beach, VA 23464

Dear Ms. Strand:

I am writing to apply for the position of Systems Analyst at Atlantic Coast Industries, which was advertised at the Career Development Center at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). I am a senior majoring in Management Information Systems at WPI, and I believe my education, experience, and career interests make me a viable candidate for this position.

Your position requires experience in computer systems, financial applications software, and end-user consulting. My course work has provided training on mainframes, minicomputers, and microcomputers, as well as with a variety of software programs and applications. My practical experience at WPI's Computer Center as a programmer and student consultant for system users gave me valuable exposure to complex computer operations. Additionally, I worked as a cooperative education student in computing operations for a large bank, where I gained knowledge of financial systems. My enclosed resume provides more details on my qualifications. My background and career goals seem to match your job requirements well. I am confident that I can perform the job effectively.

Furthermore, I am genuinely interested in the position and in working for Atlantic Coast Industries. Your firm has an excellent reputation and comes highly recommended to me. I am very interested in the Dynamo mainframe project your firm is currently working on and the possibility of being a contributor to your organization.

My enclosed resume provides more details on my qualifications. Please consider my request for a personal interview to discuss my qualifications and to learn more about this opportunity. I will call you in two weeks to see if a meeting can be arranged. Should you need to reach me, please feel free to call me at 508-831-5260 or email me at lwatson@gmail.com. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to talking to with you.

Sincerely yours,

Lisa Watson

Sample Cover Letter

Please avoid repeating the exact language used in this sample. Instead, try to be creative and use language that conveys your uniqueness and communication style.

1234 Main St.
Worcester, MA 11111

April 1, 2013

Dr. Jane Smith
Department of Women's and Perinatal Pathology
Doctors Hospital
4321 Doctors Rd.
Boston, MA 22222

Dear Dr. Smith,

I am writing to you to apply for the Associate Scientist position available in the Division of Women's and Perinatal Pathology at the Doctors Hospital. I have a Bachelor of Science degree in Biochemistry from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) and heard about the job opening through WPI's Career Development Center. As a Pre-Med graduate, I am specifically passionate about working at the Pathology Lab for its ability to translate discoveries from the lab bench to the bedside. The focus of your research in ovarian cancer and subsequent therapies directly parallel my lifelong educational interests of becoming an OBGYN and improving women's wellbeing.

My experiences at WPI, which include my Major Qualifying Project (MQP) and WPI undergraduate Biochemistry course work, have taught me a myriad of lab practices both in the field and in the lab and solidified my technical writing skills. More specifically, the unique research team I joined at UMass Medical School to complete my MQP and the long-term nature of my lab work there solidified my intuitive and practical understanding of molecular biology techniques such as PCR, gel electrophoresis, and genetic engineering. My undergraduate experimental coursework has allowed me to apply and conceptualize a wider range of techniques (Western Blotting, DNA sequencing, and RT-PCR) where I often worked with a team to investigate the relevance of our data to the greater research community and develop novel strategies to enhance future delivery of targeted results.

The Pathology Lab's affiliation with Doctors Hospital, Harvard Medical School, and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute speak for its high level of dedication to treating ovarian cancer, endometriosis, and related implications. Doctors Hospital's world-renowned clinical success stems from its strategic ability to join hands with its department of clinical research. Similarly, I am determined to become an innovative OBGYN invested in improving the lives of women and hence I am driven to apply my lab strengths and skills in the research of the Pathology Lab.

I am confident that my education, project and lab experiences will allow me to be an added asset to the Pathology team. I would like to request a personal interview to discuss my qualifications and to learn more about this opportunity. I can be reached at 111-222-3333 or by email at jbrown@gmail.com. Thank you for your time and consideration, and I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Brown

The Cover Letter Formula

TOP OF LETTER:

Your Street Address
City, State ZIP code

Date

Contact Name, Title (if you know it)
Company Name
Company Street Address
City, State ZIP code

Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name of Contact:

PARAGRAPH 1: Who you are / Why you are writing

- State the position for which you are applying and how you learned about it (if applicable, include the name of the person from the company who referred you – “name drop” any contacts you have encountered)
- Include your degree, major, year in school, and school name (if senior, include graduation date)
- State why you are interested in the position
TIP: Do NOT start with “My name is _____”

PARAGRAPH 2: The matching game

- Prove to the company that you can do the job by matching your skills/experience to the responsibilities and qualifications stated in the job description
- Explain how the company can benefit from hiring you and how you are the right person for the job
TIP: Focus on the skills/experience you have, not on those you don't have
TIP: Use language from the job description and provide specific examples

PARAGRAPH 3: Compliment the company

- Demonstrate knowledge of the company and what they do – do your research
- Tell the company why you are excited to work for them specifically
TIP: Use the company's website. Also check out recent company news articles, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.

PARAGRAPH 4: Thank you / What's next

- In one sentence, reiterate your interest in the position
- Thank the employer for their time and consideration, and state that you look forward to hearing from them
- State that you are available for an interview and include your email and phone number

SIGNATURE:

Sincerely (or Regards),

Your Full Name ← if you are providing a hard copy of your letter, sign here

Career Development Center
Project Center
508-831-5260 | cdc@wpi.edu
wpi.edu/+cdc



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