

How to Write an Effective Cover Letter

A well-written cover letter establishes a connection between you, the applicant, and the recruiter by detailing the qualifications you have for a particular job. It helps the reader navigate your resume, and “fleshes-out” your areas of expertise and experience. Simply put, an effective cover letter can get you an interview through its narrative about your resume. It directs the reader how to read your resume and, as such, is considered a *directional document*. A detailed cover letter is an essential component of the job search, and can supplant the resume in importance when used effectively.

These letters follow the typical three-paragraph business letter format, written in modified-block style. They are left-justified with a “ragged” right margin, contain no indentation, and have one space between paragraphs. (The manner in which this document is written)

Begin with *your address*, then date. Skip two-or-three lines. Type the *recipient’s full name, with no gender title*. *Address* follows. Skip the same number of lines. Use the recipient’s full name in the *salutation*, no gender title.

Note: If you don’t have an actual person’s name, simply address to *Dear Human Resources*, or something comparable. Do **not** use “To Whom It May Concern:” or “Dear Sir/Madam:”

The *opening paragraph* is usually no more than two sentences, and begins by showing the reader where you found the ad or notice, the job description, and three qualities you will bring to the job. (Notice how similar this is to a well-written objective statement.) Your letter should begin with what is known as the “you-view.” Directly address the reader, rather than beginning with “I.”

Good Example I

“Your posting on Monstertrak.com for a software specialist with networking skills interests me. With my computer experience, application knowledge, and communication skills, I can serve _____ well.”

If you are interested in working for a company, but it has not advertised any available positions, you can try a variation on this opening. This method of job application shown below is called “fishing,” and has proven useful for some applicants.

Good Example II

“Can your company / name of company use the services of a software specialist, who has an emphasis on networking, and possesses proven communication skills? I am interested in working for you as a _____.” Here is where it can get tricky. You can provide a general description of the ideal job you seek with this company, but don’t be too specific. You have already provided the reader with a good idea of where to place you.

Do **not** begin your letter with “I am seeking a position as a _____,” or “I have just graduated with a degree in _____, and wondered if you had any openings for a _____.” Get your reader immediately involved by using “you” or a variation, and provide instant specificity about the job and your qualifications so as not to waste a recruiter’s time.

The second, or *body paragraph* is where you do your best work by showing the recruiter the details of your skills and where you acquired them. Begin by careful analysis of your three selected qualifications and explain where they originated and how you have used them. “Show” your reader how you have implemented any acquired knowledge, how you have been focused, dedicated, and attained marketability.

In this paragraph, you may also provide supporting details and other experiences that you think will make you a favorable candidate. Take your time, use verbs, and think of the body paragraph as your moment to shine. Now is not the time to be falsely modest. If you don’t grab a recruiter’s attention immediately with good, telling details, you run the risk of losing his or her interest. And your letter will end up on the bottom of the stack.

Don’t worry about the length of your body paragraph. It should run at least half a page, and often is longer. This paragraph is the single exception to the “less is more” rule for personal business communication.

Your *closing paragraph* is where you wrap up your package and reiterate your request. Keep it pleasant, and stay focused on your request for an interview. Try something like this:

“After you have read my resume for the details of my qualifications, I will be happy to answer any questions. Please contact me at _____ so we can discuss how my computer experience, abilities with networking security, and proven communication skills will benefit you at _____.”

If you need to hear back from the recruiter by a certain date, you may specify it somewhere in your second sentence. You should not “push” too much, however.

You can contact the company a few days after your letter and resume have been received. Keep your questions brief and upbeat. If your letter has been received, ask if there are any questions you can answer. Reiterate your availability. Be pleasant. A well-written cover letter will make all the difference, and speak volumes about you and your qualifications. Please see our online examples.

<http://upcp.ece.gatech.edu/general/career.html>