

Graduate School of Language and Educational Linguistics

THE COVER LETTER

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The purpose of a cover letter is to illustrate how your background fits the particular job for which you are applying --and it should also motivate the employer to meet you. It allows you to highlight your most significant accomplishments relevant to the job. Form letters have little impact; the amount of time you put into your cover letter is directly proportional to the amount of attention it will get. You should always send a cover letter when mailing a resume or application to an employer.

Your cover letter should attract the employer in a positive and original way so that he or she is motivated to read your resume. The best way is to use a "hook" that will arouse the interest of the reader. To pinpoint this hook, ask yourself what attracted you to the position or the organization. An article in a journal or professional newsletter? A comment by a professor? A talk by a chief administrator? Whatever it was, use it. This hook is your personal connection to a specific employer.

Before Writing the Cover Letter

The first step in writing a cover letter is to research the prospective organization in order to send the letter to a specific person. The organization receiving the letter feels little or no responsibility to respond if the letter is not addressed to a specific individual. Ideally, your letter will be read by that person; at the very worst, your letter will be read by another employee who will route it to the proper person for his/her attention.

Your letter should be so specific that no one else could possibly have written it. It should be so specific that it could only go to the person, or at least the organization, addressed. Learn the correct name of the organization and of the organizational representatives. Spell those names correctly.

Analyzing the Job Description

Your second task in writing a cover letter is to analyze the job description. Look at the duties and qualifications of the job and design your cover letter to match them as much as you can. Often job listings are very short and vague. In this case, draw from your research of similar employers to infer what skills and abilities might be required. For example, in an elementary school job, experience with youth, such as camp counseling, would be related, while business experience might be useful for teaching corporate managers.

Analyzing Your Background

Think about your background in relation to the qualifications and job duties. Ask yourself what experience you have that is similar to the job requirements. Areas to think about are: class projects, work or volunteer experiences, extracurricular activities (both on and off campus), hobbies, sports and travel. Tailor your letter to the reader. Usually prospective bosses will be impressed only if your skills, education and experience are first-rate and directly applicable to the specific job they want done, as well as to their specific organization. When you include irrelevant information you waste space that could be used to focus on job-related strengths. You also waste the reader's time. Don't lie, but don't volunteer information that might be considered in a negative light. Such information can be deadly prior to an interview, but may not hurt at all when divulged after you have had a chance to make a good impression in person.

Writing the Cover Letter

Consider purchasing extra stock of your resume paper to use as stationery. This will help you present a consistent image and may also help keep your documents from getting separated. If you want to go all out, you may even be able to get envelopes to match. Cover letters should be no longer than one page and individually written for each employer. Be brief and to the point. Think in terms of four paragraphs:

1. Introduce Yourself: Tell the reader why you are writing (e.g., the position or type of work in which you are interested and, if appropriate, how you learned of the position or the organization). If someone suggested that you write, put that person's name in the first sentence if possible. That's where it will have the most impact. In short, state your connection to the employer, who you are and what you want.

Examples (Job):

In May, I will be receiving an MA in TESOL from the Monterey Institute of International Studies. Throughout my academic career, I have had a special interest in the area of technology. My studies of computer-assisted language learning have been especially rewarding, and now I would like to expand my abilities as a professional in the field.

I saw your ad in the Chronicle of Higher Education for a German instructor, and I would like to apply for the position. The qualities you need are a close match for the ones I've developed in my career. I have three years of experience in teaching college-level courses, and I'm sure that my skills would be of use to you right away.

Jean Turner suggested that I get in touch with you to learn about your organization's work in developing assessment instruments. Since my own background includes experience as a test item writer, Prof. Turner believes that I would be an asset to your language assessment team.

I am moving to Mexico in August, and I understand that your organization is one of the area's leading language training firms. If you need an instructor for either French or English, I think my qualifications would be of interest to you.

2. Indicate why you are interested in working for this organization. This is your only chance to demonstrate that this is not a form letter. Employers like to know that you have a specific interest in their organization and what you can do for them.

Examples:

The article in the San Jose Mercury about your college's program for multilingual employees of local area businesses was very impressive. Congratulations. I'm pleased to see a school get public recognition for commitment to language education. My own experience in language teaching could help with your goal of offering additional courses in the East Bay Area.

Everything I know about Harvard leads me to believe that it is the kind of university where I could fully utilize my skills, experience and education, and make a valuable contribution.

As a longtime resident of Japan, I am well aware of the outstanding reputation of Kwansei Gakuen University, which leads me to express my interest in this dynamic organization.

My experience on the administrative staffs of two colleges could be of interest to you in your new drive to centralize administrative functions at Universidad Iberoamericano.

3. Sell Your Experience and/or your education: Limit your illustration to one or two job-related issues. Show knowledge of the profession, the organization, and the field. Identify two or three specific items of your background (i.e., course work, projects, experience or interests) that will be significant to the employer. Refer to your resume for additional details of your background.

Examples:

For the past two years, I have worked as a language instructor with Custom Language Services at the Monterey Institute. During this time, I have acquired experience in tailoring language programs for specific individuals and was recognized for my effective use of authentic materials. I am especially proud of my module on business communications.

My involvement in program administration has provided opportunities to develop the skills of teacher education and supervision. I understand that these capabilities are important to a university that excels in teacher effectiveness.

In my career as a language instructor, I have had the opportunity to hone my training skills. In particular, I've learned how to facilitate participant involvement and assess learner progress. These abilities proved vital when I interned in a fast-paced corporate environment at FirstRing India.

Fill in the blanks:

As a language instructor, I feel I have two unique benefits to offer: _____ and _____. Throughout my career, these qualities have produced _____. Furthermore, they have encouraged others to _____.

A quick glance at my CV should offer proof of my skills in _____ and _____. You'll see that I've had a number of opportunities to use these abilities to _____.

I know that a _____ has to have the quality of _____, a quality that is important to your school. It's a characteristic that I've worked on throughout my career. I have consistently _____.

4. Closure: Request an interview appointment or tell the reader that you will call in a week to see if it would be possible to arrange an interview. If the employer is some distance away, indicate when you would be available for an interview by phone. You might also suggest that if the employer (or the employer's representative) plans a business trip to your area in the near future, you would appreciate the chance to meet with him or her at that time. Let the follow-up be with you, the seller. Be conscious of the fine line between assertive and aggressive. Don't take the employer's power away.

Examples:

I am confident that my knowledge and abilities would be of value to your organization. I would like to request a few minutes of your time to discuss my qualifications. I will contact you next week to see if a meeting might be arranged. If you have any questions in the meantime, please do not hesitate to call me.

I would appreciate a chance to meet with you and discuss my qualifications in detail. I will be in the area in early January. If this is convenient for you, please contact me at ____- _____. If I do not hear from you before then, I will call to see if we can arrange another meeting.

MODEL OF A COVER LETTER

Date

Name of Contact Person, Title

Organization

Address

City, State, Zip (Country)

Dear Contact Person:

Opening Paragraph: Opening salute; make it good!

Catchy or clever opening sentence to make the reader want to continue reading.

May be a question that zeros in on a high-need area of the employer.

Name the job for which you are applying. Tell how you learned about it.

Mention the name of the person (if any) who referred you to the organization and vacancy -- preferably a colleague of the contact person.

Body Paragraph(s): Critical content section.

Make clear what factors about this job or organization appeal to you. Show them that you know what they do and are aware of the challenges they face. Show how you might help them meet those challenges.

Acknowledge the skills required by the open position.

State the skills/strengths you bring to the job that parallel those needed for position.

Give examples of your skills and work experience -- quantified results, accomplishments, achievements -- and how they will transfer to this job.

Closing Paragraphs: Push for personal contact: an interview.

Refer to documents enclosed, such as your CV, reference letters, and writing samples.

Tell the contact person you will call him/her to see if you might arrange for an interview, or state that you are available for an interview at his/her convenience.

Make it very easy for the person to contact you: list one or two phone numbers and days and times when you can be reached. Yes, even though it's on the resume, state it again.

Sincerely,

(Your signature above your name)

Your Name Typed

Enclosures:

Curriculum vitae

Letters of Reference (3)

(List only those things - but everything - enclosed.)