

Cover Letters 101

Cover letters often serve as your first real introduction to the person you want to hire you. They support the information you are providing in your resume, and give you an opportunity to talk a little about how what you know fits the needs of the employer. There are a number of ways you can present your letter, depending on the type of position you are applying for, but above all keep it short and sweet.

Are cover letters really that important?

The answer is: it depends. Cover letters are more important to some job types than others. A construction site worker is less likely to need one than an office worker, but it never hurts to have one. If an employer is trying to decide between two equally skilled candidates and only one submitted a cover letter, the employer is most likely to pick the one who put in the extra effort.

Style & Structure

The style of the cover letter may change a lot depending on the creative or traditional culture of the hiring company. However, the general structure of the letter should stick at least loosely to a business letter format.

1. A cover letter should never be more than a page long. Half a page is better. If you end up with more than 3-5 short, focused paragraphs start looking for things to trim.
2. Whenever possible address the cover letter to a specific person. The hiring manager is best. The head of the department the job is in can work if no hiring manager is specified. Do research to find out. Check the company's website or call and ask. If you absolutely can't find a name then consider leaving the salutation off entirely.
3. Avoid long, intricate sentences and paragraphs. Avoid jargon and passive verbs like forms of is and be. You want your writing to be clear, confident, and enthusiastic without losing professionalism.
4. Let the tone of the letter be a little casual. Not so casual you seem disrespectful or dismissive, but as if you had them there in person to start a polite conversation with. Being too formal can make you seem stiff and awkward.
5. Keep in mind what points you want to draw the employer's attention to and organize your paragraphs around those. Each paragraph should have a particular purpose whether to showcase key skills or tell the employer what sort of extra benefits you are offering them.
6. Don't go overboard with the adverbs.
7. Pay specific attention to the instructions in the job posting. Some postings include word count limits for the cover letter or ask for other materials to be sent along with the letter and resume.

Content

Don't just repeat your resume in paragraph form. Instead take an opportunity to explain how the key skills and experience you so painstakingly listed fit the company's needs and how your unique experiences will benefit them. Use some of the same language you saw in the job posting.

- 1.** Each letter should be tailored to the hiring company and position. Using a completely generic letter reduces its effectiveness and makes you look less appealing to the employer. Often employers mentally equate the amount of effort you put into getting hired with the amount of effort you will put into the job itself. Try to reference some bits of relevant information on the company to show you did your research and are familiar with their needs and goals.
- 2.** Make it interesting. If you find it boring to write, the employer is going to find it boring to read. Consider including a relevant story or anecdote about how you got interested in the company or profession or about a project you worked on that lets you show off skills they want.
- 3.** Remember that the letter is about what you can do for the company, not what they can do for you. Avoid talking about what you hope to gain from the position. It wastes space you could be using to tell the employer how your awesome skills are going to make things so much better for them and their company.
- 4.** Focus on the positive. Your letter should be all about what you can do, not what you can't do. Don't apologize for skills or experience you think are not quite as good as they could be, just tell them honestly what you can do and stop at that.
- 5.** Let some of your personality show in your letter. You want to be more to the employer than just some words on a page. You want to be able to show them that you are a good fit for the culture and values of the company. Avoid including any personal statistics though, things like marital status, religion or political affiliations.
- 6.** Be accurate. Make sure the name of the company, the position, and the hiring manager are all clear and correct. There can be a great deal of difference between the requirements of a supervisor I and a Supervisor II so make sure you include the full position title to avoid confusion or being judged by the requirements of a job other than the one you applied to.

Getting That Extra Edge

Sometimes it's that one little addition of a particular attitude or engaging anecdote that will turn a good cover letter into a great one.

- 1.** Use your connections. If you know someone who is in good standing with the company talk to them about the position and if they think you would be a good fit. Include this in your letter, with their permission. Employers will give more weight to opinions from people whose judgment they already trust. Statistics tell us that 85% of people who get jobs already know someone in the company.
- 2.** Write your letter as if you are the best, most awesome candidate possible for the job. If you don't believe it why should the employer? Don't be modest. Sing your own praises. No one else is going to do it for you.
- 3.** Say a little about why you're interested in the company or field. If you've dreamed of working for them since you were 7 years old and the medicine they make saved your life then put in a sentence or two about it. It is pretty attention getting and shows a dedication and investment in your work.

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John Shannon
Vice President
Boeing Space Launch Systems
499 Boeing Blvd SW
Huntsville, AL 35824

Mr. Shannon,

When I saw the Systems Electrical Analysis & Design Engineer position posted on Boeing.com I could hardly wait to apply. I've been fascinated and inspired by the contributions Boeing makes to science and technology ever since I had the privilege of attending the company's presentation on electrical circuits in extreme conditions at the 2010 engineering conference in St. Louis.

The competition to be a part of the groundbreaking work you do is fierce, but I bring several advantages that not every candidate can. I already have 4 years of experience working with Marshall Space Flight Center here in Huntsville. The connections and partnerships I've built provide me with knowledge, insight and resources someone coming to the center for the first time won't be able to match. Let me put my design experience and analytical skills at your disposal and show you that my reputation for efficiency and innovation is more than well earned.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my application. I look forward to speaking to you more about what I can contribute to Boeing Space Launch Systems. I can be reached at (256) 436-7659 to set up a meeting time.

Best Regards,
John Doe