

Winning Cover Letters

What's the Purpose of a Cover Letter?

A cover letter is your introduction to a possible employer when you're unable to meet face to face. When sending a resume to a potential employer, a cover letter goes along with it to explain why you are sending your resume, what position you are interested in, and what makes you the best candidate for the job. From your cover letter, employers will learn about your writing and communication skills so take your time working on a great letter. Ask someone to help you proofread your letter and help you improve it. A winning cover letter catches the reader's attention and makes he or she want to review your resume and call you for an interview.

Cover Letters 101 (or getting started)

A Format for Success

A cover letter is formatted like a business letter and matches the font and style of your resume. Key pieces included in a cover letter are:

- Complete mailing address including the zip code where an employer can reach you.
- Date with the month written out, the day, and the year, for example: October 18, 2008.
- Contact information for the recipient of your letter and resume. This includes the person's name (if you know it) and title, the organization's name and the complete mailing address.
- A greeting to the person receiving the letter. Try to address the letter to the name of the person you are contacting. If you don't have this information, address it to "Dear Recruitment Manager:" Be sure to use a colon after the greeting instead of a comma since it's a business letter.
- The body of the letter includes four paragraphs that are not indented with a blank line between each paragraph.
- Close the letter using the salutation "Sincerely" followed by a comma.
- After the salutation, leave four blank lines for your signature and sign in blue ink after printing.
- Under your handwritten signature, type your name so that it appears just like your signature will.
- Finally, include your phone number underneath your name and type "Enclosure: Resume" so the employer knows that you are also sending a resume.

Putting Your Best Letter Forward: The Body of Your Cover Letter

The body of your letter will include four paragraphs, each with specific kinds of information. Remember to keep things short and sweet. Employers don't have a lot of time to read all the cover letters and resumes they receive, so your letter needs to catch their attention early and make them want to keep reading!

The Introduction Paragraph

The first paragraph tells the reader the reason you are writing. If you are applying for a specific position, list it by the name the employer gives the job. If you are not applying for a specific position or do not know what to call the position, then explain the type of work you're interested in. In this paragraph you need to tell the reader where you learned about the employment opportunity (such as, from the newspaper, an online web posting or referral).

The Second Paragraph

In the second paragraph you want to impress the employer with your qualifications for the position you are interested in. Briefly summarize some of your experiences and technical qualifications. Three or four

good, clear sentences that describe your greatest strengths are all you need. Take information from your resume and elaborate on it, or include new information. The skills and attributes need to relate directly to the job description and job requirements. This paragraph tells the employer what you can do for them and why you would be a good candidate for the tasks they need to accomplish.

The Third Paragraph

In this paragraph you will dazzle the employer with your amazing personal attributes. Briefly describe the strengths you possess that make you a great addition to the organization. Here you can list some of your experiences that have helped you develop skills and characteristics such as leadership, time management and organizational skills or a strong work ethic. Take information from your resume and elaborate on it, or include new information. You only need three or four good, clear sentences that demonstrate your greatest strengths. This paragraph will show the employer why you are the best person for the job.

The Conclusion Paragraph

The last paragraph thanks the reader for his or her time and consideration and tells how and when you can be contacted. Include your phone number and email address here and let the employer know that you will provide more information if needed.

The Finishing Touches

- Proof, proof and proof again before printing.
- Your cover letter goes on the same paper as your resume. Remember bright colors, perfume, or sparkles are not necessary.
- Don't staple the cover letter and resume together in case the employer wants to scan them into a computer or make copies for others.
- Don't fold the cover letter or resume. Lay them flat in a large envelope so they arrive at the employer's office looking neat and crisp.
- If you are emailing someone your resume, then your cover letter will be the email you send with your resume attached.

Additional Resources

2008-2009 Career Passport. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Career Services Network, 2008. Available at <http://careernetwork.msu.edu/>

Creating Your High School Resume by Kathryn Kraemer Troutman (2nd Edition). Indianapolis: JIST Works, 2003.

For Additional Information Contact:

Laura Allen, 4-H Career Education Coordinator
Children, Youth, Families and Communities
Michigan State University Extension
160 Agriculture Hall
East Lansing, MI 48824
Phone: 517-432-7632
Fax: 517-355-6748
Email: lacourse@anr.msu.edu



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