

Writing an Effective Cover Letter

First impressions are critical in your job search. A cover letter is your first writing sample a potential employer will read, so it must be well written and free from errors. A well-structured cover letter can make a significant impact on the odds of the hiring manager moving your resume to the potential-candidate pile.

PURPOSE

A cover letter identifies your interest in a position and should focus on what you can do for the employer, rather than on what you will gain from the company. From the employer's standpoint, they are looking for the best candidate who has the skills and attributes they need to benefit their organization. A cover letter is the best way to highlight the skills you can offer the hiring employer.

FORMAT

Cover letters should be one page in length and written in the style of a business letter. Cover letters and resumes should be printed on matching, high quality paper in white, ecru (off-white), or eggshell, with a matching envelope. It is common for employers to request a copy of your cover letter and resume to be sent by email. If the employer requests an emailed copy of your resume, format and send it as a PDF document.

TEXT OF THE LETTER

You should develop a standard but flexible letter which can be adjusted to suit a specific employer and geographic region. Do not start your letter with "To Whom It May Concern". If you do not know the name of the person to whom you are directing your letter, contact the receptionist to obtain the correct spelling of the person's name in charge of hiring. When researching a company, you might be able to find the contact's information online.

The key to writing a good cover letter is to make it as professional and specific as possible. When preparing your cover letter, consider the qualities employers are seeking in a candidate and which of these skills you already possess.

FIRST PARAGRAPH

The first paragraph should be designed to let the employer know the reason you have contacted the company. Explain why you are writing to the organization and describe the skills you possess, as well as how these skills will contribute to fulfilling the organization's needs.

If someone referred you to this position, mention their name in the beginning. Identify your educational status (I am a third-year law student at Elon University School of Law) and explain why you are writing (and I am interested in being considered for an associate position). Mention your specific interest in the employer and geographic location of the firm or office, especially if you plan to live in the area. The last sentence of this paragraph should serve as your thesis sentence for the remainder of the letter, identifying two to three traits or interests you will discuss in the next paragraph.

SECOND PARAGRAPH

The second paragraph should be designed to persuade the employer to meet and hire you. Briefly highlight your background skills, explaining why you are interested in this particular position, and show a long-term interest. Discuss how your experiences translate into skills the employer is seeking. Your coursework, past employment, clinical experiences, externships, or other areas can be used to illustrate your skills. Do not directly repeat text from your resume; instead, highlight skills and experiences applicable to the position for which you are applying.

THIRD PARAGRAPH

The third paragraph should be designed to thank the employer for his or her time and to express your availability for an interview. Let them know what enclosures you have included with your application, in addition to your cover letter. Make a suggestion to meet with the employer if you intend to be in the local area in the near future. Your request for an interview may be taken more seriously if you inform them of your plans to be in their local area on a particular day. If you are applying for an On-Campus Interview, indicate your interest in speaking with the firm's attorneys on the scheduled date for their Elon Law campus visit.

COVER LETTER OUTLINE

I. YOUR CONTACT INFORMATION

- a. Full name
- b. Your street address including your city, state and zip code
- c. Today's date

(Please note: You do not include your email address or telephone number on a cover letter.)

II. LAW FIRM'S CONTACT INFORMATION

- a. The contact's name of whom you are sending your resume or application.
All attorneys bear the title of Esq. at the end of their name. Judges should be addressed as The Hon. Judge (Doe). Some recruiters are not attorneys and should be addressed by their full names.
- b. The company's full name.
- c. The physical address of the office including city, state, and zip code.

III. INTRODUCTION- *First Paragraph*

- a. Address your contact by, Dear Mr. or Ms. (Doe). If you are addressing a judge, then you would start your letter with Dear Judge (Doe).
- b. First mention anyone who referred you to the position and mention them by name.
- c. Identify yourself by year and law school.
- d. State how you heard about the job opening/position and your specific interest in the employer.
- e. Address any specifics about geography and if you are planning to practice in the employer's area after graduation.

IV. BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND SKILLS- *Second Paragraph*

- a. Briefly highlight your background and skills, explaining why you are interested in this particular position.
- b. Illustrate why you are the best candidate for the position.
- c. Discuss your coursework, past employment, clinical experiences, externships or other areas describing your qualifications.
- d. Do not directly repeat text from your resume, instead highlight skills and experiences applicable to the position for which you are applying.

V. CONCLUSION- *Third Paragraph*

- a. Mention your resume, writing sample or other documents you have included for review.
- b. Thank the contact person for reviewing your materials and note that you look forward to hearing from them.

VI. SIGNATURE

- a. Sincerely,
- b. Your handwritten signature (if you are applying hardcopy via mail).
- c. To represent an online signature, type your name only once with /s/ written before your name.
Example: /s/ Sally Somebody

COVER LETTER CHECKLIST

- Typos are the number one offender. Be sure to have several people, besides family or friends, read over your cover letter to ensure all spelling, punctuation, grammatical and typographical errors are found and corrected.
- The letter should focus on what the applicant can bring to the employer rather than what the employer can offer the applicant.
- Do not include your email address or telephone number in the return address information. *This information should appear on your resume, but not your cover letter.*
- Be sure to include the date.
- Do not forget to include the addressee's name.
- Keep the letter brief and succinct. A one page cover letter is preferred.
- Do not assume employers will know what you mean; if you are not clear and specific, your point has not been made and may not come across the way you intend.
- Be clear to the employer about your interest in the position.
- Be specific about your work experience.
- Be sure to sign the letter and properly format your signature.

HOW CPD CAN HELP

1. Schedule an appointment with one of our counselors for guidance, editing and cover letter advice.
2. Contact CPD for other resources and materials to guide your cover letter writing process.