

Writing Your Cover Letter

Cover letters are difficult to write because your audience evaluates your qualifications based on how well you write about them. You can take different approaches to writing an effective cover letter, and you can use this handout as a starting point. In this handout, you will learn how to:

- write the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion of your cover letter
- format your cover letter according to document design principles

Introduction & Conclusion

The introduction and conclusion of cover letters usually provide employers with basic information. The introduction tells your audience who you are and what position you are applying for. The conclusion reminds your audience about your qualification and refers to the future.

Refer to the checklists below to ensure that you have included in your cover letter all the information employers will be looking for.

In your introduction, did you...

- ✓ Name the position you are applying for and how you heard about it
- ✓ State your degree, major, college affiliation, and graduate date
- ✓ In the last sentence, make a *strong claim about your candidacy* that previews 1-3 qualifications you will discuss in the body paragraphs

In your conclusion, did you...

- ✓ Remind your reader why you are a strong match for the position and company
- ✓ Mention the other documents you are enclosing with cover letter – for example, your résumé and portfolio
- ✓ Request an interview or refer to future contact with your reader
- ✓ Provide your contact information
- ✓ Thank your reader for their consideration

To find more information about cover letters, you can use the CPDC or Purdue University's OWL.

The Body Paragraphs

The guidelines below describe the information employers will be looking for in the body paragraphs of your cover letter.

1. **Connect your past, present and future.** The body paragraphs of your cover letter should show how your *past* experiences make you a unique candidate in the *present*, and how those qualifications will be an asset when you apply them to projects at your target company in the *future*. In particular, you should explain the advantages of your present experience: the unique approach of CMU's programs and the qualifications and training the degree has equipped you with.

BEFORE

I graduated from CMU's Master's in Statistical Practice program. Before that, I was an undergraduate student at the University of Vermont in Burlington, Vermont where I majored in Finance, with a minor in Economics. I also worked as an academic advisor during my undergraduate degree, helping students with career questions.	<i>Restates résumé without interpreting skills acquired</i>
--	---

AFTER

CMU's Master's of Statistical Practice program is uniquely focused on professional development and practical workplace skills. The client management skills I've acquired through my coursework in consulting and communicating analytic results make me a strong addition to Walgreen's team of data analysts, who are committed to effectively communicating trends, inaccuracies and outcomes to internal and external clients.	<i>Explains past and present experiences</i> <i>Explains how experiences will benefit the future</i>
--	---

2. **Highlight the qualifications that your experience gave you – not the experience itself.** Your cover letter should NOT simply restate your résumé but should elaborate on the qualifications that your abilities, accomplishments, and experiences give you.

BEFORE

I graduated with a Masters in Chemical Engineering from Carnegie Mellon University. This past year, I was a research assistant with Dr. XXX and I worked alongside other chemical engineers to ensure we completed our project by the deadline.	<i>Doesn't state what applicant gained from experience</i>
---	--

AFTER

My research in the Chemical Engineering department at Carnegie Mellon University has been focused on migration of electrolytic components through separator membranes. As a research assistant with Dr. XXX , I worked towards the device implementation of semiconducting conjugated polymers and acquired integrated technical judgment and a background in modeling from first principles. Through my research assistantship I have been prepared to provide materials expertise to Sandia National Laboratories' customers and sponsors.	<i>States qualifications gained from experience</i> <i>Links qualifications to future</i>
--	--

3. Be as specific as possible when introducing your abilities and qualifications; explain why.

Remember the axiom: show; don't tell. You do not want the ideas in your cover letter to be general or vague. Try to eliminate sentences that could be written by anybody with a M.S. in statistics. Specifics make you look interested, well-informed and detail oriented.

BEFORE

I was excited when I saw the job posting for a Software Development Engineer at Microsoft because it is a great company to work for. My extensive knowledge of computer science will contribute to finding solutions to challenges in the technology sector today.	<i>Doesn't explain why the company is great to work for</i>
I believe I am a good candidate because of my enthusiasm, my love for computer science, and my knowledge of many programming languages.	<i>Every applicant has these qualifications</i>

AFTER

As per our conversation at Carnegie Mellon Universities' Technical Opportunities Conference, I am writing to apply for the Software Development Engineer position at Microsoft. My advisor, Professor XXXX, has also has a close relationship with your division and encouraged me to pursue this position.	<i>Mention contacts within the company</i>
As a recent graduate from CMU's School of Computer Science, I am an ideal candidate for the position due to my experience with web back-end development and app design, particularly with C#, Objective C, Javascript, and PHP.	<i>Explains why applicant is ideal</i>
More specifically, my experience building modern phone applications in C++ will be an asset to the work on expanding and innovating messaging scenarios currently being conducted by Microsoft's team of engineers.	<i>Shows how past experience will benefit future work</i>

4. Unify the body paragraph of your cover letter around one qualification, including the experiences that have given you this qualification. In particular, the first or second sentence of the paragraph should emphasize one or two specific qualifications afforded by the unique training of your degree. The rest of the paragraph should provide specific details that support this main idea. These details should distinguish you from other applicants who also have a Master's in statistics.

BEFORE

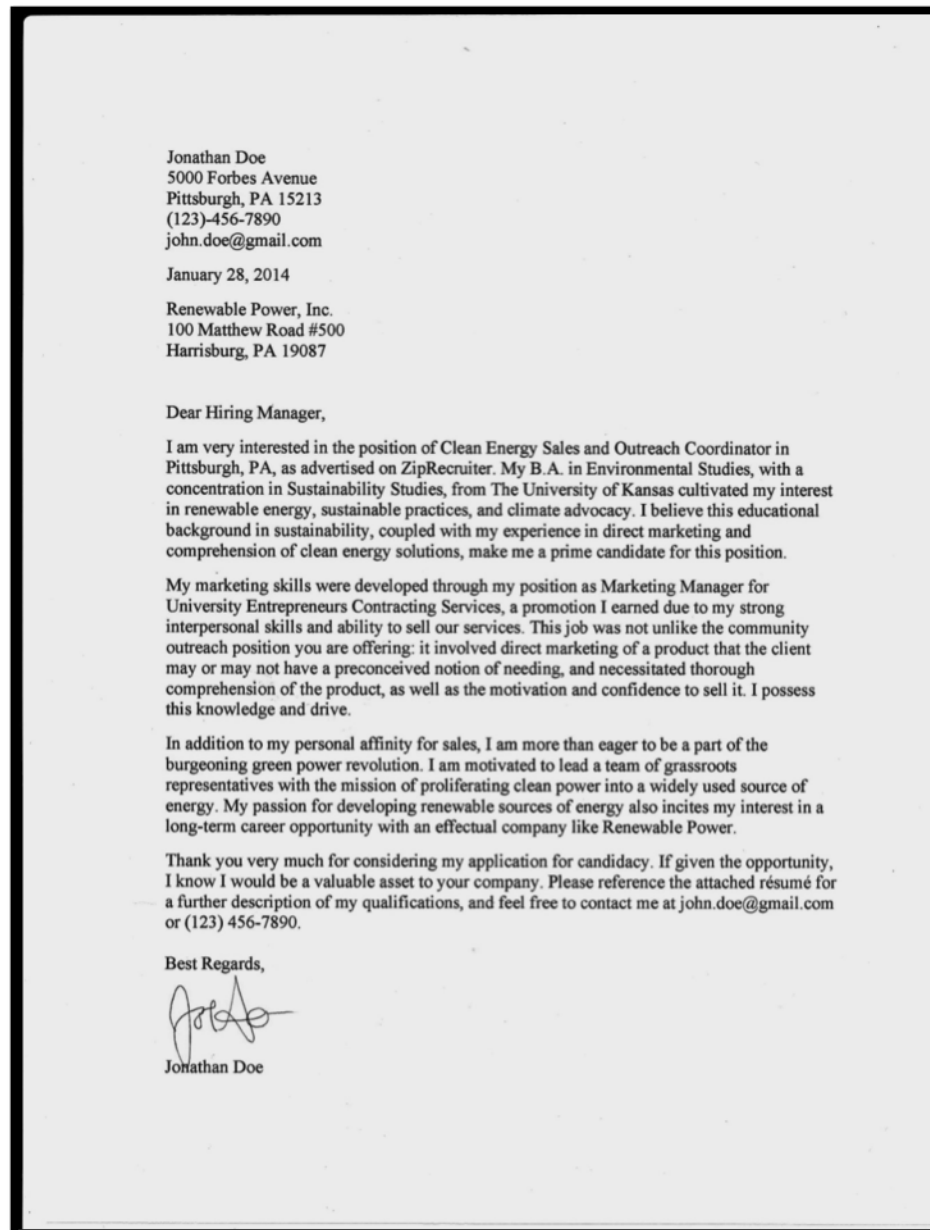
CMU'S MSP program emphasizes the application of statistics in the workplace. I have completed four actuarial exams – P, MLC, FM, and C. I have experience in hierarchical regression with multilevel models. Furthermore, I have experience performing continuous and discrete multivariate analysis on large and incomplete data sets. I also have experience in biostatistics in things like epidemiological modeling and study design.	<i>Jumps from one qualification to another and doesn't give reader a unified idea of applicant</i>
---	--

AFTER

Data analysts at Google also have the added opportunity and challenge of recommending solutions for the data problems they encounter. The unique training of CMU's statistical practice with practical application of statistical knowledge in the workplace has prepared me for that distinct problem-solving facet of this position . My coursework and current project of working with a variety of clients to find data-driven solutions has given me the communication strategies necessary to present solutions to Product Managers, Sales Associates, Engineers, and Marketing Teams. In addition to reporting solutions , my completion of four actuarial exams – P, MLC, FM and C – and my experience in hierarchical regression analysis of multilevel models have given me the problem-solving skills to analyze and interpret large data sets.	<i>Unifies all qualifications around the idea of finding solutions for data problems</i>
--	--

Formatting Your Cover Letter

- Your cover letter should be concise and economical, providing ample **white space**, or parts of the page left without text, with at least 1" margins and short paragraphs.
- The heading of your cover letter not only provides your contact information, but it also creates more white space and makes it look more friendly to readers.
- Employers and recruiters may have to review thousands of cover letter and do not want to read a document that looks crowded or lengthy.



For more information on document design, you can make an appointment with Kerry Ishizaki, the GCC's Visual Communication Consultant.