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 qualifications 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 graduation 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 your 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. Your potential for future contributions is probably what the employer is most interested in.

**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.

**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.

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.

**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.
3. **Tailor to the Company.** Employers can sense when they are just reading a generic letter. Vague ideas do not make an impact, and are simply skimmed over. In contrast, specifics make you appear invested and conscientious. Stand out by showing how you can help the company achieve their specific organizational goals.

**BEFORE**

I was excited when I saw the job posting for a Software Development Engineer at Microsoft because of the company’s great reputation. My extensive knowledge of computer science will contribute to finding solutions to challenges in the technology sector today. I believe I am a good candidate because of my enthusiasm, my love for computer science, and my knowledge of many programming languages.

**AFTER**

As per our conversation at Carnegie Mellon University’s Technical Opportunities Conference, I am writing to apply for the Software Development Engineer position at Microsoft. My advisor, Professor XXXX, also has a close relationship with your division and encouraged me to pursue this position. 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. 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.

**Formatting Your Cover Letter**

Your cover letter should be concise, providing ample white space through margins and short paragraphs. Employers are busy and do not want to read a document that looks crowded or lengthy.