

## COVER LETTER HOW-TO:

### What is a cover letter and why do you need one?

Contrary to what you might think, a cover letter is **not** a short essay where you get to tell your potential employer: 1) All the amazing things you've done since starting your degree, 2) What you hope to gain or learn when you get the job, and 3) How the job will help you achieve your future goals.

Like the resume it accompanies, the cover letter is not really about what you want/need or are most proud of at all.

- ***It is about the employer's wants and needs.*** The cover letter is your chance to expand upon the facts listed on your resume by showing the potential employer (in one page or less) that you “get” them; that you understand what they need in the position you are applying for, and how the skills and qualities you possess are ready to meet that need.
- ***It is also a writing sample*** that gives you a chance to prove that you possess great written communication skills (a quality that ranks anywhere from #1 to #3 on annual surveys of skills employer seek).
- Like writing an essay, ***you should have a solid thesis statement before you write the cover letter.*** Your thesis statement guides how you write your cover letter and your resume. These two documents should support each other; and the thesis statement is the starting point. In order to come up with that thesis statement, you must first analyze the position announcement to identify the employer's needs and the language they use. (See example on the next page)
- ***The cover letter should complement, not duplicate, resume information,*** and focus the prospective employer's attention to pertinent areas of your experience.

**NOTE: The cover letter is ALWAYS tailored to a specific position/organization.** There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all cover letter.

### Addressing “Difficult” Issues

Difficult issues can be anything from a lack of internship/volunteer experience, to a low GPA, to why an employer should take a chance on a candidate who wants to move from central Wisconsin to New York City. Basically difficult issues are anything that make you worried that the employer will exclude you from the candidate pool before you even get a chance to present yourself in person.

- ***To address or not to address?*** – Obviously you'd much rather explain these topics in person during an interview, but you are worried you may never get an interview unless you explain them first. A career counselor can guide you in determining whether or not the issue you feel compelled to address in the cover letter truly needs to be addressed or not.
- ***Be succinct*** – If you do address something, don't spend more than 1-2 sentences on it. You are merely trying to be proactive, not give the employer your life story.
- ***Where should they be mentioned?*** -- Difficult items should only be brought-up in the final paragraph of the cover letter.

**SALUTATION:** "Dear Mr. Smith:" or "Dear Ms. Jones:" (do NOT use "Mrs." unless you know for sure), or simply "Dear Hiring Manager:"

### **INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH (Thesis Statement)**

Start with a "grabber" statement. This serves as your chance to tell the employer how you heard of the position and/or mention a personal connection you have with the organization. Then add your thesis which tells the reader what you are about to prove and in which order. It should be direct and confident without being arrogant or wishy-washy. You have the skills/abilities they need and you are going to prove that to them in this letter.

**Example: "Brian Jenkins, director of the Environmental Policy office, recently told me about the Management Analyst position in the Human Resources Office. My research, analysis, and project management skills make me an excellent candidate for this position."**

### **BODY PARAGRAPHS (Proof Statements)**

These paragraphs should demonstrate two things: Why you are a good fit for the job, and why you want to work for this *specific* employer. Body paragraphs often are 3-6 sentences long. They can be longer or shorter depending on relevant content but they should never be just one sentence. The Body of the cover letter is the place where you support your Thesis Statement from the Intro Paragraph *not* by summarizing your resume, but by making connections for the employer between your skills and the needs of their business.

1. In the example above, research skills were listed first, so you would begin by discussing your research experience: ***("Throughout my work and academic experiences, I developed strong research abilities.")***
2. Follow that statement with some examples which illustrate your research skills (work, volunteer opportunities, class projects, etc...)
3. Show how your experiences tie into the employer's mission, and/or business model, and/or the specific job you're applying for
4. Move onto the next skill listed in your Thesis Statement (in this example "analysis") and complete steps 1-3 for that skill and finally do the same thing with "project management."

**SPECIAL NOTE: *There is one key piece of information that you must include in your cover letter:*** demonstrate what you know about the employer; their mission, business model, recent achievements, etc... and link that knowledge to your own skills and achievements relevant to doing the job. You may achieve this either by:

- Interweaving knowledge of the employer into your Proof Statements as you go along;
- Including a separate paragraph after your Proof Statements and before the Conclusion Paragraph wherein you discuss things you've learned about the employer from your research which genuinely impress you.

### **CONCLUSION PARAGRAPH**

The first sentence of this paragraph is a restatement of your thesis: "Given the research, analysis, and project management skills I've just discussed, I believe I am an excellent candidate for the Management Analyst position." This is also the place to mention any schedule-related information such as when you graduate or when you are available to begin the position. The final paragraph might also include transitional thoughts such as: "I look forward to learning more about this position with a personal interview." You may also restate your contact information if desired. The paragraph should end with you thanking them for their time and consideration.

**Sincerely,**

**Your Name**