Crafting Cover Letters

Overview

A cover letter is a professional correspondence that accompanies your resume and allows you to address specifics about the job to which you are applying and how your unique skills and experiences can benefit the organization. It should...

- grab attention and encourage reading of the resume;
- show your personality/fit with the position/organization, illustrating you have researched the employer and the requirements for the job;
- be tailored to specific employer;
- provide an example of your writing skill.

Formatting Guidelines

Length
A cover letter is typically one page, with three to five paragraphs (four is ideal).

Format
Use the same heading, font style, size, and type of paper (if printed) as your resume.

Salutation
Address your cover letter to a specific person, if possible. Call for the name of the hiring manager, if not listed; never use “To Whom It May Concern”. If a name is unavailable, use a title (e.g., “Dear Editor”; “Dear Marketing Analytics Manager”, etc.)

Content and Structure Guidelines

First Paragraph: The Hook

- Use this paragraph to spark reader’s interest
- Focus on what differentiates you from other job-hunters
- Mention a reference, if you have one
- State the reason why you are writing the letter towards the end – the position for which you are applying or in which you are interested

Weak opening paragraph:
“I am writing today to apply for the marketing communications assistant position at Discover Financial that you have posted on your website.”

Better opening paragraphs:
Sample IMC opening paragraph
“Since we met at Discover’s Information Session on campus, I’ve been issued a Discover Card and have been impressed with the award-winning fraud protection you’ve instituted for customers. When I envision myself in an integrated marketing communications role at Discover, I see new ways to help you pitch this benefit, based on information supplied by your customer database.”
Sample Journalism opening paragraph
“Quick, check CNN. That’s always the response among my family and friends when rumors of breaking news are in the air. Whether it’s Barack Obama’s inauguration or the tragedy of Chris Brown and Rihanna, CNN is the first place to start. Here’s the catch: we’re not talking about the cable news station—we’re talking about the website.”

Middle Paragraph(s)
- Demonstrate knowledge of the employer/position
- Tailor to the needs of the posting
- Focus on transferable skills that match the job qualifications
- Use action verbs to describe your achievements
- Stress accomplishments by referencing specific items on your resume
- Provide more information on how you can deliver the benefits mentioned in your opening paragraph

Better middle paragraph:
Sample IMC middle paragraph
“During my five years in marketing at Utah State University, I advised clients across campus from the Center for Persons with Disabilities to the Center for Integrated Bio Systems. I’ve moderated focus groups, written RFP’s, worked with research vendors and run recruitment campaigns. I built marketing plans, creative briefs, Web sites, brochures and videos; however, my most important contribution was building relationships with clients and earning friends in a politically charged environment.”

Sample Journalism middle paragraph
“In my capacity as a managing editor for the now defunct online magazine, xyz.com, I honed my ability to write snappy service pieces for the web with never more than 250 words. My readers were coming to the site looking for something fast, fun and interesting. I also built in interactive opportunities for them to engage with the content. I’ve seen firsthand that good content may bring in viewers, but it may not make them stay.”

Closing Paragraph
- Express confidence that you fit the job well
- Talk about next steps: tell them that you’ll call to follow-up with in a specific time if possible
- Link to your website and/or your LinkedIn profile, as appropriate.
- Ask for the interview

Weaker closing paragraph:
“I hope you will review my resume and consider me for the position. You can reach me at: 000-000-0000. I look forward to hearing from you soon.” (Passive close)
Better closing paragraph:

“I am excited about making a contribution to the success of Discover Financial, and I look forward to meeting you for a discussion on how I can fulfill your needs. I will call you by next ________ to get your feedback and arrange for an appointment.” (Active close)

Summary of Do’s and Don’ts

Do...

• address your letter to an individual, if possible.
• send an employer specific letter.
• use simple language and sentence structure. Be a ruthless copy-editor!
• keep your letter brief, not more than one page.
• try to answer the reader’s question: “Why should I hire YOU?”
• focus on the company, not you – count the “I’s” in your cover letter!
• match your skills, education and experiences to the job duties and qualifications.
• properly use articles, such as “a”, “an” and “the”.

Don’t...

• waste the first paragraph with a boring introduction: grab the reader’s attention!
• use trite phrases like, “Enclosed please find my resume” –they waste precious space.
• depend on the reader to take action; tell the reader when you follow up and then do so, if possible.
• send the letter without checking for typos, incorrect grammar, punctuation, etc.
• rehash your resume; be original!
• use contractions (including “don’t”)!

Sample cover letter on following page
January 14, 2013

Ms. Sally Smith  
Director of Human Resources  
XYZ Media Group  
150 West Monroe  
Chicago, IL 60606

Dear Ms. Smith:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua. Ut enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamco laboris nisi ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis aute irure dolor in reprehenderit voluptate velit esse cillum dolore eu fugiat nulla pariatur. Excepteur sint occaecat cupidatat non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt mollit anim id est laborum.

Sed ut perspiciatis unde omnis iste natus error sit voluptatem accusantium doloremque laudantium, totam rem aperiam, eaque ipsa quae ab illo inventore veritatis et quasi architecto beatae vitae dicta sunt explicabo. Nemo enim ipsam voluptatem quia voluptas sit aspernatur aut odit aut fugit, sed quia consequuntur magni dolores eos qui ratione voluptatem sequi nesciunt.

Neque porro quisquam est, qui dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet, consectetur, adipisci velit, sed quia non numquam eius modi tempora incidunt ut labore et dolore magnam aliquam quae rerat voluptatem. Ut enim ad minima veniam, quis nostrum exercitationem ullam corporis suscipit laboriosam, nisi ut aliquid ex ea commodi consequatur.

Porro quisquam est, qui dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet, consectetur, adipisci velit, sed quia non numquam eius modi tempora incidunt ut labore et dolore magnam aliquam quae rerat voluptatem. Ut enim ad minima veniam, quis nostrum exercitationem ullam corporis suscipit laboriosam, nisi ut aliquid ex ea commodi consequatur.

Sincerely,

Miranda Bailey
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COVER LETTER REVIEW CHECKLIST</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPELLING</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Avoided using jargon and acronyms (e.g., IMC, BSJ, MSJ, JR, etc.).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Performed a spell check on your finished letter. However, carefully read aloud every word to detect mistakes such as using “form” instead of “from”.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Had a friend, mentor or Career Services member proofread it.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PUNCTUATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Consistently used correct punctuation throughout your cover letter.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Used a colon instead of a comma after your salutation. Used a comma after your complimentary close.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Used parentheses and exclamation points sparingly or not at all.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GRAMMAR</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Employed the same verb tense throughout the cover letter.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Capitalized all proper nouns.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Wrote out all numbers between one and nine, but used numerals for all numbers above 10, e.g. 11, 12, etc. Began sentences with a spelled-out numeral (i.e. Eleven service awards won while employer.).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Used articles appropriately (i.e. a, an, the); did not use contractions.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WORD CHOICE</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Reviewed easily confused words: accept (to receive), except (to exclude), affect (to bring about change), effect (result), role (a character assigned or a function), roll (to revolve).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Used key words and skills that were listed in the job description.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Addressed what the employer is looking for in a candidate by highlighting how you meet their qualifications using specific skills demonstrated with examples.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Used positive and strong language (e.g., I am confident, I know) and avoided the use of superfluous language (e.g., I believe, I feel, I think).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VERIFICATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Used the same header on your cover letter as appears on your resume.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Clearly stated the position for which you are applying or in which you are interested.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Alluded to the next steps in the process, including asking for an interview.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DESIGN</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Used one easy-to-read and professional font (no less than 10 pt.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Did not over use capitalization, italics, underlines, or other emphasizing features.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Kept letter to one page, three to five paragraphs, with four being ideal.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>