Anatomy of a Cover Letter

A cover letter generally consists of three or four paragraphs and is always less than a page; very experienced candidates applying for senior positions may write more. The goal is to give employers enough information to want to meet you, without overwhelming them.

Prepare

- Research the employer to identify what about the organization or its products appeals to you
- Review the job description in detail
- List each type of experience and skill the employer is seeking
- Outline how your qualifications meet the employer’s needs
- Choose two or three of your best qualifications and identify concrete examples to illustrate them
- Outline how your skills, interests, and goals match those of the employer. Focus on the positive. Do not refer to qualifications that you lack

Salutation

- Address your letter to a specific person whenever possible
- Be sure of the correct spelling and appropriate title (Mr., Ms., Dr., etc.); you should not address the contact by their first name unless you know them personally
- Avoid “To Whom It May Concern.” Acceptable alternatives include “Dear Hiring Manager” or “Dear Search Committee”
- Use the same heading on your cover letter as you did on your resume

First Paragraph

Explain clearly and concisely why you are writing. Since your name is at the bottom of the letter, you do not need to introduce yourself. State the full name of the position and how you learned about it, including the name of the person, publication or website and the date of the listing. This paragraph can be as simple as the following:

- “I am writing to apply to the Special Events Assistant posted on Husky Career Link. I believe my skills and experience would enable me to excel in their position.”

Some applicants prefer to begin this paragraph in a way they hope will grab the reader’s attention. This can be an effective technique if you know the personality of the organization or the individual receiving the letter, but it is risky if you don’t:

- “Alpha Software’s commitment to innovative mobile application development resonates with me as a computer engineer with an interested in mobile technology.”
- “As a recent Electrical Engineering graduate with a 3.9 GPA, I can offer your firm a mastery of the latest technologies...”

If you were referred by somebody:

- “I’m writing to apply to the Public Relations Assistant position at PR Worldwide posted on Husky Career Link. After speaking with Arnold Warner, a former PR Assistant at PR Worldwide, I am confident my past experience and education make me a viable candidate for this position.”
Second/Third Paragraph

Write these paragraphs using the outline you prepared, tailoring your letter to the job. Do not repeat the content on your resume; instead use this space to explain the value that your experience would bring to the employer. Highlight experience relevant to that position and briefly describe concrete examples to match your qualifications to the job description:

- “The research paper I wrote about the benefits Islamic banking would have on the U.S. economy required me to do extensive research of literary sources and interview experts in the field of finance. I am confident I could utilize these skills successfully as a Market Researcher at World Banking Inc.”

Employers are interested in your motivation as well as your experience. Be sure to explain why this job and this organization appeal to you and fit into your career goals. Demonstrate that you have researched the organization by referring to company products, services, philosophy or mission in your explanation of why you are a good match:

- “Boston Pharmaceuticals’ cancer vaccine has revolutionized preventative medicine. One of my most important career goals is to help bring cutting-edge health care products to doctors and patients, which is why I would be proud to work for your organization.”

Sometimes a resume leaves questions in the employer’s mind, for example, about periods of unemployment or reasons for a career change or relocation. These questions may be serious enough to prevent you from getting an interview, so it is usually best to address them directly:

- “I resigned from my last position six months ago in order to care for an ailing family member. I am now ready to recommit myself full time to my career.”

- “Although I currently live in Boston, I am preparing to relocate to the San Diego area in order to be closer to my family.”

Do not point out qualifications/experience listed in the job description that you may not have. Focus and highlight the relevant experience you do have and your motivation for applying to that particular position.

Last Paragraph

- The closing paragraph can be short and simple.
- Stress your enthusiasm for the position and your interest in meeting for an interview.
- State how and when you can best be contacted.
- Thank the individual and end with an appropriate closing:

“I am eager to discuss with you the kind of contributions I can make to Zephyr Advertising as an Account Representative. Feel free to contact me at 123-456-7890 or jobseeker@yahoo.com. Thank you for your kind attention to my application; I look forward to hearing from you.”