

Writing Effective Job Search Letters

During your job search, you'll be writing lots of letters:

- Cover letters to potential employers when you send your resume for consideration
- Letters to network contacts and the referrals that arise from those contacts
- Thank-you letters as follow-up to networking meetings and interviews
- E-mail letters that might encompass all of the above purposes but often call for a more direct and concise writing style

Language and Tone

When writing your job-search letters, use a natural tone and simple writing style. Avoid stilted, outdated phrases like “per your request” and “enclosed please find.” Of course, because these are business letters, they should sound more formal than a quick note or e-mail you'd send to a friend, and they must be absolutely correct in grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

And keep in mind, employers are interested in people who really want to work at their company. Don't be afraid to show interest and enthusiasm about starting your career. These are among the most positive qualities you bring to the workplace.

The following sections discuss each of the different types of letters in detail.

Cover Letters

Cover letters—letters that accompany or “cover” your resume each time you send it out—are essential partners to your resume. Because they can be customized for each person to whom you write, they give you the opportunity to highlight the information that is most relevant for that particular audience. But hiring managers may not read cover letters thoroughly (or at all), so don't count on your cover letter to communicate essential information that's not in your resume. Instead, think of your cover letter as an opportunity to sell yourself in a different way than your resume does.

It's helpful to think of your cover letter as having three parts:

- A. A beginning
- B. A middle
- C. An end

A: Attention!

Use your opening paragraph to tell readers why you are contacting them. Try to use interesting language to capture attention and make the reader want to know more about you.

Here's an example showing the attention-getting introduction of a letter written to the manager of a retail store where this candidate hopes to become assistant manager:

Mark Strong, Manager
Bethpage Books
255 Seaview Street
Bethpage, NY 11714

Dear Mr. Strong:

If you are looking for a hard-working, dedicated, literate assistant manager, please consider me!

B: Because...

The middle section of your cover letter should answer the question "Why should I hire you?" by communicating your key qualifications for the job you're seeking. You can convey this information in one or two short paragraphs or in three or four bullet-point statements. Be careful not to copy phrases or achievements word-for-word from your resume. Instead, write a summary statement about related achievements or tell a brief story that illustrates your strengths.

Here's the middle section of the letter introduced above:

My education, work history, and personal activities all point to a successful career in retail management—specifically in the book business. I have recently completed my Bachelor of Business Administration (concentration in Marketing) from Hofstra University, and for five years I have worked part-time as a retail sales associate. This experience led to my decision to pursue a career in retail management. I understand retail sales concepts, merchandising, and general business management. Most of all, I am a true book lover and would be able to communicate my knowledge and enthusiasm to your customers.

C: Close

Neatly wrap up your letter with a polite yet assertive closing that asks for an interview; here's an example:

Thank you for your consideration. I am enthusiastic about working at Bethpage Books and will call within a few days to see if we can schedule an appointment to meet.

Sincerely,

When writing your letters, keep in mind the employer's concerns (what you can do for them) and don't overstate your own needs and interests.

Sample Cover Letters

Here is a sample cover letter that demonstrates a good "ABC" format and clearly communicates key selling points.

Written by a student seeking a co-op job, the letter is a follow-up to a phone conversation. Note the three "selling points" in the middle section of the resume:

- A strong academic record.
- Personal attributes shown in prior jobs and volunteer positions.
- A hard-to-quantify but very important interest in children that is essential for people who work with sick children.

Meredith Johnson

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August 29, 2002

Peter Andrews, M.D.
Children's Hospital Medical Center
Administrative Director: Research
3333 Burnet Avenue
Cincinnati, OH 45229

Re: **Co-op Position, April-September 2003**

Dear Dr. Andrews:

As you suggested, I am forwarding my resume to you for consideration for a six-month co-op position at Children's Hospital beginning next spring.

I am about to begin my second year at Northeastern University in Boston. My major is Psychology, but my career goal is medicine, and I would welcome any kind of hospital-based position that provides either laboratory experience or patient contact.

My record of school work, employment, and volunteer activities demonstrates attributes that make me a valuable employee:

- **Strong academic skills:** First-year college GPA of 3.96 with a rigorous honors-level courseload emphasizing math and science.
- **Reliability and work ethic:** In all my employment and volunteer positions, I have maintained an excellent record of being on time, prepared, and eager to take on new responsibilities.
- **Deep interest in the care and welfare of children:** In addition to volunteering at Children's for the past two summers, I have extensive experience caring for children, including a full-time summer nanny position. I relate well with children, truly care about their interests, and intend to pursue a career in pediatric medicine.

I will be at home in Cincinnati until September 15 and would be glad to meet with you. After that, I am easily reachable by phone or e-mail and will be home again during the holiday break (December 14-January 3).

Thank you for your consideration. I am enthusiastic about returning to Children's Hospital next year and believe I will be a valuable co-op employee.

Sincerely,

Meredith Johnson

enclosure: resume

A sample cover letter.

E-mail Cover Letters

Cover letters that you send by e-mail should be a bit shorter and crisper than mailed letters. An ideal e-mail cover letter is short enough that it is 100 percent visible in the browser window of most e-mail programs.

When e-mailing in response to a job ad or posting, follow these steps:

1. Type your cover letter into the e-mail message area.
2. Copy your text resume from the word-processing file and paste it below the cover letter.
3. Run your e-mail program's spell checker. If your e-mail program does not have a spell checker, spell check and proofread your resume in the word-processing program before pasting it into the e-mail window. Cover letters (even e-mail cover letters) must be just as perfect as your resume—no typos, grammatical errors, or careless mistakes.
4. Include a formatted (Microsoft Word) resume as an attachment (unless the ad you're responding to specifies "no attachments"; in that case, simply send the text version without the attachment).
5. Write a descriptive subject line for your e-mail message. To fit many keywords into the subject line, you might want to abbreviate. Here are a few examples of descriptive subject lines:

PR Assoc (Job #A-924) - BA Northwestern, NBC internship, strong writing skills

Med Rsrch Co-op - UCLA Bio major, hosp. exp., great work ethic

App Developer - Visual Basic, C++, database - recent training - team player

MSW - strong assessment & counseling skills - program mgmt exp

Following is a sample of an e-mail cover letter. Note that it is shorter than the previous sample letters—it gets right to the point and quickly communicates key information.

Subject: Marketing candidate - creative & focused - BSBA

Dear Ms. Rolfson:

Are you looking for an enthusiastic, hard-working person for your marketing team?

As a Marketing major (graduating with a BSBA in May), I gained a thorough understanding of the concepts of effective marketing, advertising, and merchandising. My activities during college expanded on my classroom learning — I had the chance to take leadership roles that demonstrated my ability to "get things done" while working effectively with both students and administrators.

I have identified your company, its products, and its culture as a good match for my qualifications and interests.

Can we schedule a time to explore your needs and my qualifications? My background, professionalism, and enthusiasm will make me an effective member of your team.

Sincerely,

Tyler Van Aark

A sample e-mail cover letter.

The next e-mail letter is an example of a networking contact letter. In general, networking letters are more informal and less “hard sell” than cold-call or ad-reply letters. When writing these letters, you can make the assumption that the person you’re writing to will be happy to help you because of your personal relationship or your referral from someone they know.

Subject: Referred to you by Joe Sanders

Dear Ms. Rolfson:

Joe Sanders at All-Sports Marketing suggested that I contact you about my job search.

I am about to graduate from Ohio State with a BS in Athletic Training. When a knee injury ended my competitive baseball career two years ago, I found Athletic Training a good fit for my abilities and my interest in helping athletes achieve top performance.

I was fortunate to land an internship at All-Sports Marketing last year. I couldn't have asked for a better experience! Mr. Sanders offered me a full-time job upon graduation, but I've decided to pursue training rather than marketing, and Mr. Sanders thought your connection with Dr. Samuels and the rest of the Pirates' training team could be helpful to me.

Would you be willing to spend a few minutes giving me your advice and suggestions? I would greatly appreciate it. I'll be in Pittsburgh the first week in April and can meet with you any time that week, whatever is most convenient for you.

Sincerely,

David McChesney

For your convenience, I am including my resume both in text version (below) and as an attached MS Word file.

A sample e-mail networking letter.

Thank-You Letters

It's common courtesy to thank people who have helped you, so be sure you send a thank-you letter to each networking contact who shares time, advice, or contact names with you.

After an interview, use your thank-you letter to reinforce your candidacy, reiterate key points, and make a positive impression on the interviewer. Many job candidates don't take the time to write thank-you letters, so just by doing so you'll give yourself a competitive advantage.

You can send thank-you letters by e-mail as an immediate follow-up, but they make a stronger impression when you send them by postal mail. Don't try to hand-write your thank-you letters unless they are very short (one or two sentences) and you have exceptionally clear handwriting. Instead, use your word processor and compose a neat letter with information that will keep on “selling” you even when you're no longer in front of the interviewer.