

Cover letters: guidelines and template

The guidelines here apply to both hard copy correspondence and e-mail.

Main differences between e-mail and hard copy correspondence:

Format: your **signature block** (address, etc.) goes below your name in e-mail, while it goes at the top of the page on hard copy.

E-mail requires a **subject line** logical to the recipient. E-mail subject lines can make or break whether your e-mail is opened and read. Hard copy can have a subject line too, but it's on the letter (after recipient's address block and before "Dear...", and it's seen after the letter is opened.

Signature: Of course you won't have a handwritten signature on e-mail, but don't forget this on hard copy.

All cover letters should:

Explain why you are sending a resume.

Don't send a resume without a cover letter.

Don't make the reader guess what you are asking for; be specific: Do you want a summer internship opportunity, or a permanent position at graduation; are you inquiring about future employment possibilities?

Tell specifically how you learned about the position or the organization — a flyer posted in your department, a web site, a family friend who works at the organization. It is appropriate to mention the name of someone who suggested that you write.

Convince the reader to look at your resume.

The cover letter will be seen first.

Therefore, it must be very well written and targeted to that employer.

Call attention to elements of your background — education, leadership, experience — that are relevant to a position you are seeking. Be as specific as possible, using examples.

Reflect your attitude, personality, motivation, enthusiasm, and communication skills.

Provide or refer to any information specifically requested in a job advertisement that might not be covered in your resume, such as availability date, or reference to an attached writing sample.

Indicate what you will do to follow-up :

- **In a letter of application** — applying for an advertised opening — applicants often say something like "I look forward to hearing from you." However, if you have further contact info (e.g. phone number) and if the employer hasn't said "no phone calls," it's better to take the initiative to follow-up, saying something like, "I will contact you in the next two weeks to see if you require any additional information regarding my qualifications."
- **In a letter of inquiry** — asking about the possibility of an opening — don't assume the employer will contact you. You should say something like, "I will contact you in two weeks to learn more about upcoming employment opportunities with (name of organization)." Then mark your calendar to make the call.

Page margins, font style and size

For hard copy, left and right page margins of one to 1.5 inches generally look good. You can adjust your margins to balance how your document looks on the page.

Use a font style that is simple, clear and commonplace, such as Times New Roman, Arial or Calibri. Font sizes from 10-12 points are generally in the ballpark of looking appropriate. Keep in mind that **different font styles in the same point size are not the same size**. A 12-point Arial is larger than a 12-point Times New Roman.

Sample cover letter format guidelines:

*(Hard copy: sender address and contact info at top. **Your address and the date can be left-justified, or centered OR right-justified in GB.**)*

Your Street Address
City, State Zip Code
Telephone Number
E-mail Address

Month, Day, Year

Mr./Ms./Dr. FirstName LastName
Title
Name of Organization
Street or P. O. Box Address
City, State Zip Code

Dear Mr./Ms./Dr. LastName:

Opening paragraph: State why you are writing; how you learned of the organization or position, and basic information about yourself.

2nd paragraph: Tell why you are interested in the employer or type of work the employer does (Simply stating that you are interested does not tell why, and can sound like a form letter). **Demonstrate that you know enough about the employer or position to relate your background to the employer or position.** Mention specific qualifications which make you a good fit for the employer's needs. (**Focus on what you can do for the employer**, not what the employer can do for you.) This is an opportunity to explain in more detail relevant items in your resume. **Refer to the fact that your resume is enclosed.** Mention other enclosures if such are required to apply for a position.

3rd paragraph: **Indicate that you would like the opportunity to interview** for a position or to talk with the employer to learn more about their opportunities or hiring plans. **State what you will do to follow up**, such as telephone the employer within two weeks. If you will be in the employer's location and could offer to schedule a visit, indicate when. State that you would be glad to provide the employer with any additional information needed. Thank the employer for her/his consideration.

Sincerely,

(Your handwritten signature [on hard copy])

Your name typed

(In case of e-mail, your full contact info appears below your printed name [instead of at the top, as for hard copy], and of course there is no handwritten signature)

Enclosure(s) (refers to resume, etc.)

(Note: the contents of your letter might best be arranged into four paragraphs.)

Cover letters generally fall into one of two categories:

1. **Letter of application:** applying for a specific, advertised opening.
2. **Letter of inquiry:** expressing interest in an organization, but you are not certain if there are current openings.

Information-seeking letters and follow-up

To draft an effective cover letter, you need to indicate that you know something about the employing organization. Sometimes, even with research efforts, you don't have enough information to do this. In such a case it is appropriate to write requesting information.

After you receive the desired information you can then draft a follow-up letter that:

- **Thanks** the sender for the information;
- **Markets** why you would be a good job candidate for that organization based on the information; and
- **Explains** why you are sending your resume.

...which means it does what all cover letters do, as explained at the start above!