

Cover Letter Basics

The resume is NEVER mailed to a prospective employer without an accompanying cover letter. It should complement, not duplicate, resume information and focus the prospective employer's attention to pertinent areas of experience. In the cover letter, you get a chance to draw connections between your experience and their requirements, linking concrete items from your resume with broader ideas and skill areas.

The cover letter is ALWAYS composed for a specific person or organization and is not mass-produced. If the contact person is not given in the job listing (or if you are sending an "unsolicited" letter of inquiry), here are strategies for finding a name of an appropriate individual:

- Go online and search the company's website
- Call the company directly and ask for a contact person
- Check on eRecruiting in "employers" section for contact info for companies who recruit through this office

There are four sections in a standard cover letter:

1 - The Opening

Use the opening paragraph to capture the prospective employer's interest and let them know why you are writing this letter – be specific! State the exact position or area you are interested in. Describe your academic qualifications (degree level and major— if relevant). Tell them how you learned of the position or organization (a personal referral, posting on their employment web site, ad in the newspaper, etc.). Consider closing this section with a sentence or two that summarizes what you are going to focus on in the rest of the letter

2 - The Body (*Why they should hire you*)

Relate your qualifications to the specific job requirements and type of organization using examples of your experience to make your points. Briefly describe your educational and work experience and how they would make a good match with the ongoing and/or future needs of that specific organization. This section answers "Why should we consider you as a candidate?". Justify the employer's interest in you, "What is your competitive advantage over other candidates?". Let your personality come through, "Why are you excited about the position or organization?". DO NOT simply repeat, word-for-word what is already on your resume; instead make associations and draw your experience and qualifications together.

3 - The Schmooze (*Why you want to work for them*)

Discuss why this specific employer, industry, or organization appeals to you. You need to do some basic research on the industry, organization, and position. Employers reading your letter want to know you respect and like their organization. This paragraph is an opportunity to show the employer that you have gone the extra mile to gain information. Discuss things that you have discovered which genuinely impress you. This is also an opportunity to discuss how your career interests and experiences fit their organizational philosophy.

4 - The Closing

Use the closing paragraph to request an interview at the prospective employer's convenience. Give them your phone number and email address where you can be reached. It is also acceptable for the applicant to initiate the next response by indicating that you will call to follow up with them. If the prospective employer is not located in the applicant's immediate geographical area, it is to your advantage to mention if you will be in that general area at a particular time. You may also mention if you are willing to relocate or already plan on moving to that area. Be sure to thank the employer for their time. End the letter with "Sincerely" and your name.

The Salary Question

Applicants are sometimes asked to include salary requirements. The cover letter is the place to do this. As a recent grad, your salary history doesn't necessarily reflect your abilities. Here are a few key salary tips to keep in mind if asked about this:

- Never give a specific dollar amount, but instead list a range
- Let your prospective employer know that salary isn't the only criteria by which you judge a job offer
- Do some research on salary for comparable positions and comparable companies/cities on www.rileyguide.com (Salary Guide)

Applicant Follow-up

Applicants who have not heard from an employer after two to three weeks can do a follow-up either by mail, email or telephone. It should be directed to the original contact person and should take a "low key" approach--state the date the original letter was sent; ask if it was received (the Post Office and the internet are not infallible); restate your interest in that specific company; and ask where they are in their selection process. It is important that the follow-up does not come across to the prospective employer as, "Why haven't I heard from you?"