The Cover Letter

WHAT IS A COVER LETTER?

A cover letter IS…
- Your chance to make a case for yourself and your candidacy so the employer brings you in for an interview to learn more
- A targeted introduction to your application that relates specifically to the position
- An opportunity to make connections between your education, experience, and skills and the qualifications sought by an employer.
- A sample of your writing skills

A cover letter IS NOT…
- A general introduction to your application
- A list of accomplishments
- A summary of your resume
- Something to write quickly and without thought
- Less important than your resume
- Something you should skip. Even if the employer does not request a cover letter, we recommend you write one.

WHY DO I NEED TO WRITE A COVER LETTER?

When an employer reviews your resume, they are interpreting your skills and experiences through their own lens, and as much as you try to target your resume to a specific position, the employer may not understand what you have to offer the same way you do. The cover letter is your chance to connect the dots between your qualifications and what the employer wants or needs. You know exactly why you're qualified for the position, but the employer may need help understanding what makes you such a unique, strong candidate. In a cover letter, you can spell this out for them!

DEVELOPING YOUR COVER LETTER

Each application should have a distinct cover letter, targeted it to a specific job with its own set of responsibilities and skills, in a specific organization with its own culture and mission. For this reason, writing a cover letter takes time. Do not rush the process. Before you even start to write the letter, spend time doing the following:

- **Read the job description** and **highlight skills** you have and want to address. You should have *most*, if not all of the skills listed under "Required Qualifications" if you are applying for a position. There may be flexibility in the number of years of experience requested.
- **Do research on the organization** to get a sense of the culture—what they value, and what they might be looking for in a candidate—that is not explicitly mentioned in the posting. If you want guidance on how and where to do research, see the Employer Research page of the Career Services website.

- **Make a list of the skills and qualities** you think the employer is looking for based on the posting and your research. Print out the job description and highlight terms they use repeatedly (themes), or specific skills and activities used in the position.
- **Identify your relevant past and present experiences or accomplishments**. The goal is to demonstrate specifically how you have developed skills or qualities that qualify you for this new position. The skills and qualities do NOT have to be directly related to the position but should be relevant to the skills the employer is seeking. For instance, if you are applying for a technical research position, but do not have direct experience, think about other positions in which you have developed your attention to detail, ability to work with others, additional research skills or technical knowledge, etc.
- **Select** specific concrete examples of experiences or accomplishments that you think are most important to highlight in your letter. Start with the most relevant and prioritize your paragraphs according to how they match the job description. Remember, use the same language as they use in the job description. Don't make them guess that "excellent communication skills" = "clear and concise written and oral communication"
- **Use the *STAR* method** to flesh out your examples with details. The idea is to *show* how you developed the skills, not just to tell the employer you have them.

   - **S**ituation – Give background that will help provide context, i.e. title, organization, department, project, timeframe.
   - **T**ask – Describe what was expected or asked of you in terms of responsibilities OR the challenges or obstacles you had to overcome.
   - **A**ction – Detail the specific action steps that you took to handle the tasks or address the obstacle.
   - **R**esult – What impact did you have on the situation? What was the outcome or what did you learn? Quantify or qualify your results if you can. (E.g. Initiated a program that was attended by more than half the dormitory residents, far exceeding expectations.)

For example…

[S] Last summer I was an Academic Intern at Cornell's Summer Academy. **[T]** I had the assignment of co-teaching an Organizational Behavior course – something I knew nothing about. Taking the challenge head on, **[A]** I worked with my co-teacher to develop a method of teaching where she taught basic concepts while I researched and shared the ways the concepts applied in the real world. For example, I found an interesting article about a revolutionary method for improving employee relations. I divided the students into two groups and had them debate the pros, cons, and future implications. **[R]** By having the students take turns focusing on both the employer and employee side of the subject, I was able to keep all of them actively engaged and excited about the subject. I fully plan to bring this innovative way of thinking to any collaborative work with my fellow peers as we strive to improve the products produced by Curriculum Associates, Inc.

A WORD ABOUT APPLICANT TRACKING SOFTWARE/SYSTEMS (ATS)
Some companies use ATS to scan your documents (mostly resumes, but sometimes cover letters) to check for matches with the skills, requirements and qualifications listed in the job description. ATS programs look for the words contained in the job description, which is why it is important to make each cover letter specific to each job. Sans serif fonts are the best ones to use (i.e. Arial or Calibri). Submit resumes and cover letters as word documents (.doc) since ATS sees a .pdf as just one big picture. Likewise, templates with underlying code cannot be read so it is best to start with a blank word doc.

WRITING & STRUCTURING YOUR COVER LETTER

Cover letters should follow standard business format and should be no longer than three to four paragraphs. Use 10.5-12 font but nothing smaller. Once you have completed a draft of your letter, meet with a Peer Advisor or career advisor for review and feedback. Career Services offers drop- in hours M-F from 1:00 - 4:00 pm in Goodell. Ask a friend to **proofread and edit for grammar and spelling**. See below for information about how to structure your letter.

Your Name
Your Address

The Formatting:
Left-hand justification with margins set uniformly. You can also use the same Name/Address heading you used on your resume if you want a consistent look. The date can be left-hand or right-hand justified.

Today's Date

Company Name
Company Address
Company Address

Dear (insert the name of the hiring manager or correct contact person. If you do not have that information, use "Search Committee", "Hiring Manager", etc.),

First paragraph—Must Haves

- ✓ If you are sending your materials via email, or hand delivering, identify the position you are applying for or the purpose of the letter if it is a cold contact, and state where you saw the job or internship advertised
- ✓ If you are applying via a web-portal, skip checkpoint one – the reader already knows. In this case, you can dive right in, perhaps with a hook that will capture the reader's interest in you as a candidate.
- ✓ Answer the question "Why?" Why do you want this job? Focus your answer to this on what or how you can contribute to the organization, rather than what *you* will get out of it.
- ✓ Demonstrate your knowledge of the company by including a reference to the organization. By acknowledging their mission/reputation/accomplishments, you form a positive connection from the start.
- ✓ Set an enthusiastic tone.

Second Paragraph Should: (You may have more paragraphs depending on the content.)

- ✓ Show the reader how your strongest qualifications match the position requirements. In the telling of your story, use the same kind of language and words that are in the job description to show how you are a good match. (This also helps with Applicant Tracking Software)
- ✓ Use your STAR story to show how you meet the needs of the employer by providing evidence of your related skills and experiences.
- ✓ Use short narrative examples and showcase how your skills and experiences are an excellent match for the position.
- ✓ Elaborate upon the qualifications presented in your resume.
- ✓ Show your strong writing skills.

Closing Paragraph—Must Haves:

- ✓ Last chance to highlight skills/abilities and your interest in contributing.
- ✓ Thank the employer for the time and consideration given to your application.
- ✓ Suggest a plan of action (request an interview, indicate you will follow up in some way during a specific time frame, invite question).

Sincerely,

If you are submitting a hard copy, sign your name in pen here. Otherwise, eliminate the extra spaces or include an electronic signature.

Your Name (typed)