Cover Letters

While your resume is a summary of your credentials, your cover letter should essentially be a sales pitch. Your aim is to demonstrate why your skills and your background make a perfect match for the position you're applying for.

The cover letter is not the place to summarize your background--you have already done this in your resume. Remember, employers typically receive hundreds of resumes for each job opening. You must stand out from other job seekers in a positive way.

The best way to distinguish yourself is to highlight one or two of your accomplishments or abilities that show you are an above-average candidate for this position. Stressing only one or two unique attributes will increase your chances of being remembered by the recruiter and getting to the interview stage, where you can elaborate on the rest of your accomplishments.

You can also gain an extra edge by showing that you have some specific knowledge about the company and industry. This shows that you are genuinely interested in the job you are applying for--and that you are not blindly sending out hundreds of resumes. More importantly, the employer will view your interest as an indication that you are likely to stay with the company for a substantial period of time if you are hired.

10 Key Details to Remember

When to send a cover letter: always mail a cover letter with your resume. Even if you are following up an advertisement that reads simply "send resume," be sure to include a cover letter. It is not professional to send out a resume without one.

Length of the cover letter: four short paragraphs (on one page) is the ideal length for a cover letter. A letter any longer than that is unlikely to be read.

Paper size: use standard 8 1/2 x 11 inch paper for your cover letter. If you use a smaller size, the correspondence will appear more personal than professional; a larger size would simply look odd.

Paper color: like your resume, white and ivory are the only acceptable paper colors for a cover letter.

Paper quality: as with resumes, standard, inexpensive office paper (20 pound bond) is generally acceptable for most positions. Executive and top-level positions may require more expensive stationary papers.

Preprinted stationery: unless you're a top level executive with years of experience, you should avoid using preprinted stationery.

Typing: your best options are to use a high-quality office typewriter, a word processor with letter-quality type or a word processing program on a computer with a letter-quality printer.
However, the quality of the type on your cover letter is not as crucial as it is on your resume. A good, clean home typewriter is a satisfactory alternative for your cover letter. On the other hand, a dot matrix printer or a home typewriter that does not produce clear, crisp letters is unacceptable.

**Guidelines for content:** there is considerably more latitude in what is considered acceptable content for a cover letter than there is for a resume. However, don't assume that you need not be as careful with your cover letters as your resume--it could cost you valuable opportunities. Here are some guidelines to help you construct great cover letters:
- Use proper English and avoid abbreviations and slang.
- Use short sentences and common words.
- Make your letters more interesting by using action verbs such as "designed," "implemented" and "increased," rather than passive verbs like "was" and "did."
- Personalize each letter. Do not send form letters!
- Be sure each letter fits onto a single page. (Actually, the letter should give the appearance of being half a page long.)

**Don't forget to proofread:** it is very easy to make mistakes on your cover letters, particularly when you're writing many in succession. But it is also very easy for a corporate recruiter to reject out of hand any cover letter that contains errors. Why hire someone who doesn't appear to take care with such an important piece of correspondence? As with your resume, you must proofread your cover letters carefully--and have a friend proofread them as well.

**Avoid messy corrections:** try to avoid using correction fluid or making any messy corrections. It is always a better idea to take the time to retype the letter perfectly.

### 10 Key Ingredients of Successful Cover Letters

**Full Block Style:**

**Return address:** your return address should appear in the top left hand corner, without your name. As a general rule, you should avoid abbreviations in the addresses of your cover letters, although abbreviating the state is increasingly common in all business correspondence.

**The date:** the date should either appear two lines beneath your return address or directly under the return address, on the left hand side of the page. Write out the date; do not use the abbreviated form. Example: May 12, 1995.

**The addressee:** always try to find the name and proper title of the addressee before you send out a cover letter. Two lines beneath the date, list the full name of the addressee preceded by Mr. or Ms. (do not use Miss or Mrs., even if you happen to know the marital status of the addressee). On the next line, list the individual's formal title; on the subsequent line, list the name of the company. This is followed by the company's address, which generally takes two lines. Occasionally, the individual's full title or the company name and address will be very long, and
can appear awkward on the usual number of lines allocated. In this case, you may prefer using an extra line.

The salutation: the salutation should be typed two lines beneath the company's address, on the left margin. It should begin with "Dear Mr." or "Dear Ms.,” followed by the individual's last name and a colon. A colon appears more businesslike than a comma. Even if you have previously spoken with an addressee who has asked to be called by first name, you should never use a first name in the salutation.

First paragraph: state immediately and concisely which position you wish to be considered for and what makes you the best candidate for that position. If you are responding to a classified ad, be sure to reference the name of the publication and the date the ad appeared. Keep the first paragraph short and hard-hitting. Example: "Having majored in mathematics at Boston University, where I also worked as a research assistant, I am confident that I would make a very successful research trainee in your Economics Research Department."

Second paragraph: detail what you could contribute to this company, and show how your qualifications will benefit this firm. If you're responding to a classified ad, specifically discuss how your skills relate to the job's requirements. Remember, be brief! Few recruiters will read a cover letter longer than half a page. Example: "In addition to my strong background in mathematics, I also offer significant business experience, having worked in a data processing firm, a bookstore and a restaurant. I am sure that my courses in statistics and computer programming would prove particularly useful in the position of research trainee."

Third paragraph: describe your interest in the corporation. Subtly emphasize your knowledge about this firm and your familiarity with the industry. It is common courtesy to act extremely eager to work for any company where you apply for a position. Example: "I am attracted to Any Bank by your recent rapid growth and the superior reputation of your Economic Research Department. After studying different commercial banks, I have concluded that Any Bank will be in a strong competitive position to benefit from upcoming changes in the industry, such as the phasing out of Regulation X."

Final paragraph: in the closing paragraph, specifically request an interview. Include your phone number and the hours when you can be reached or mention that you will follow up with a phone call within the next several days to arrange an interview at a mutually convenient time. Example: "I would like to interview with you at your earliest convenience. I am best reached between 3:00 and 5:00 P.M. at (617) 555-1483."

If you are responding to a newspaper ad that asks for your salary requirements, you may decide that you would rather discuss such matters at the job offer stage. However, not stating your salary requirements when asked to do so may jeopardize your chances of even getting to an interview. (This is particularly true of entry-level positions.) For example, your cover letter may read, "I seek a starting salary between $18,000 and $20,000."

The closing: the closing should begin two lines beneath the body of the letter and should be aligned on the left margin. Keep the closing simple--”Sincerely” suffices. Four lines underneath
this, and again on the left margin, type in your full name, preferably with a middle name or middle initial. Sign above your typed name in black ink. Don't forget to sign the letter! As silly as it sounds, people often forget to sign their cover letters. This creates the impression that you don't take care with your work.

*The enclosure line:* you will help the employer to see you as a meticulous, detail-oriented professional if you include an enclosure line at the bottom of the letter.

**Half Block Style**

Half block style letters follow the same guidelines as full block letters, but the return address, date and closing are all placed on the right hand side of the letter (see Sample #2).
Dear Mr. Cummings:

My interest in the position of Masonry Supply Manager (New York Post, November 30) has prompted me to forward my resume for your review and consideration.

During the past ten years, my experience has been concentrated in the masonry and plastering products supply industry with a building materials firm. During my six years as General Manager, I took an old line business, which had undergone several years of poor management, and reversed the trend. I upgraded the firm's image, and customer and vendor relations, which subsequently increased the dollar volume and bottom line profits by 300%.

I am presently looking for a position where my experience will make a positive contribution to the start-up or continuing profitable operation of a business in which I am so well experienced.

I will contact you in a few days to arrange a meeting for further discussion. In the interim, should you require additional information, I may be reached at (203) 222-2222 between 9 A.M. and 5 P.M.

Sincerely,

Joan Smith

Enclosure: Resume
SAMPLE #2: HALF BLOCK STYLE

178 Green Street
Waterbury, CT 06708
(203) 555-5555

August 6, 1999

Pat Cummings
Human Resources Director
Any Bank
1140 Main Street
Chicago, IL 60605

Dear Mr. Cummings:

Having majored in mathematics at Rice University, where I also worked as a Research Assistant, I am confident that I would make a successful addition to your Economics Research Department.

In addition to my strong background in mathematics, I offer significant business experience, having worked in a data processing firm, a bookstore and a restaurant. I am sure that my courses in statistics and computer programming would prove particularly useful in an entry-level position.

I am attracted to Any Bank by your recent rapid growth and the superior reputation of your Economic Research Department. After studying different commercial banks, I have concluded that Any Bank will be in a strong competitive position to benefit from upcoming changes in the industry, such as the phasing out of Regulation X.

I would like to interview with you at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Joan Smith

Enclosure: Resume