



WRITING A JOB APPLICATION COVER LETTER

(Adapted from Kraunich, R.L., & Bais, W.J. (1982). *High impact resumes & letters*. Virginia Beach, VA: Impact Publications.)
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To be considered for most any new job, you will need to write a letter of application (or cover letter). Such a letter, which works in combination with your resume, introduces you to potential employers, explains your purpose for writing, highlights a few of your related work and school experiences or skills, and requests an opportunity to meet personally with the potential employer. Precisely because this letter is your introduction to an employer and because first impressions count, you should take great care to write a professional and effective letter. Remember that the letter not only tells of your accomplishments but also reveals how effectively you can communicate.

The appropriate content, format, and tone for application cover letters vary according to the position and the personality of the applicant. Thus, you will want to ask several people (if possible) who have had experience in obtaining jobs or in hiring in your field to critique a draft of your letter and to offer suggestions for revisions. Despite the differences in what constitutes a good cover letter for a particular applicant and job, however, the following suggestions typically apply.

Mechanics

- Use good quality bond paper.
- Type each letter individually or use a word processor (a general form letter that can be adapted for individual employers saves considerable time).
- Use a conventional business letter format (e.g., left-justified, block paragraphs, formal language). If you are not certain how to do this, consult a handbook or ask an LRC tutor for help.
- Try to limit your letter to a single page. Be succinct.
- Each letter should be grammatically correct, properly punctuated, and perfectly spelled. It also should be immaculately clean and free of errors. **Proofread carefully.** Do NOT rely solely on spell and grammar checkers. Have someone else proofread it as well.

Content and Style

- Assess the employer's needs and your own skills and experiences. Try to match the two in the letter in a way that will appeal to the employer's self-interest.
- As much as possible, tailor your letter, which may begin as a general form letter, to each particular job opportunity. Whenever possible, address each employer by name and title. Demonstrate, if at all possible, some specific knowledge of the organization to which you are applying.
- Write in a style that is mature but clear. Avoid long and intricate sentences and paragraphs. Use action verbs and the active voice, and avoid heavy jargon. Convey a confidence, optimism, and enthusiasm that is coupled with respect and professionalism.
- Show some personality, but avoid hard-sell, gimmicky, or unorthodox letters. Start fast to attract immediate interest.
- Arrange your paragraphs in a logical sequence and organize each around a clearly central point.

A Suggested Format

Opening paragraph: State why you are writing. Establish a point of contact between you and the employer (e.g., an advertisement in a specific newspaper for a specific position; a particular person's suggestion that you write). Give some brief idea of who you are and the credentials that qualify you for the job (e.g., a Senior engineering student at LSU; a recent M.A. in English with a full year's teaching experience).

Body paragraph(s): Draw attention to a few of the most important points on your enclosed resume. Arouse the employer's curiosity by mentioning points which are likely to be important for the position you are seeking. Show how your education and experience suit the requirements of the position, and, by elaborating on a few points from your resume, explain what you could contribute to the employer's organization. Your letter, however, should complement, not simply restate, the information contained in your resume.

Closing paragraph: Stress forms of follow-up action. Politely request an interview and/or an audition at the employer's convenience. Indicate what supplementary materials, if any, are being sent under separate cover (e.g., references, transcripts, a writing sample) and offer to provide any additional information the employer might require (e.g., a portfolio of your work, a sample publication, a dossier). Thank the employer for his/her time and serious consideration of your qualifications for the position, and indicate that you are looking forward to hearing from him/her again soon.

Some Questions to Ask as You Compose Your Letter.

- Who is your audience? Is it a single employer? A hiring committee? What are the needs and expectations of this audience? What kinds of background knowledge can you presume?
- What are your purposes for writing? What exactly do you hope to happen as a result of this letter?
- How can you best express your purposes in writing in relationship to your audience's needs and expectations?
- What specific benefits can you offer to the employer and how can you best foreground them? What concrete evidence can you present of your value to the employer's organization?
- What opening sentence and paragraph will grab the attention of the employer in a positive manner and invite him/her to read further? How can you maintain and build on this initial interest throughout the letter? If a resume is enclosed with the letter, how can you use the two to complement each other? What important information does your resume omit? What points bear repeating?
- What closing sentence or paragraph will best assure the employer of your capabilities and persuade him/her to contact you for further information or an interview?
- Does your letter convey a professional impression?
- Have you spent sufficient time drafting, revising, and proofreading the letter?