

# Cover Letter Writing Guide – 2019-2020

## What is a cover letter?

A cover letter is a one-page letter used to state your interest in a particular position, why you are a great fit for it, and request an interview. *In contrast to a personal statement, a cover letter should be focused mostly on how your skills / knowledge / experiences relate to the needs for the position (≥90%), rather than how the opportunity would benefit you.* The cover letter:

- Should be positive, clear, succinct, error-free and relevant to the requirements of desired position/opportunity
- Serves as a writing sample so proper formatting, grammar, spelling and punctuation are critical
- Should motivate and persuade the reader to reach out for an interview to learn more about you

## Is a cover letter required?

*The only time you should not include a cover letter is when a job or internship posting specifically states not to, which is rare.* Even if the posting does not specifically require one, a cover letter is good way to distinguish yourself from other applicants.

*It is imperative that you tailor each cover letter to the position/opportunity you are seeking.* By relating your knowledge/experiences to the qualifications of the position, you indicate respect for the organization and the reader's time.

## Cover Letter Basics

As professional correspondence, a cover letter needs to conform to an appropriate block style format – left justified and single spaced except for a double space between paragraphs.

- **Create a “letterhead template”** with your name and contact information. (*See sample on page 2.*)
  - Use an easy to read font that matches your resume in 11 or 12 point.
  - Set margins to .8 to 1inch wide
- **Use accurate contact information.** List an email and phone that you check and use regularly. Make sure you have a professional email and voicemail greeting and that you answer your phone professionally.
- **Use a professional salutation:** “Dear *Dr. Last Name, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, or Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:*” If the posting says “send resumes to tdavis@company” or “apply to “HR Director”, visit the organization’s website or search LinkedIn to identify their full name. If you still cannot find a name, use “Dear Hiring Manager,” or “Dear Selection Committee,”
- **Vary sentence structure** so every sentence doesn't begin with “I.”
- **Proof, proof, and proof again.** Use [grammarly.com](http://grammarly.com) or another service if you are not a good proofreader.
- **PDF your documents** to preserve formatting in transit (unless application specifically asks for a Word document).
- **Include your cover letter with your resume** (in the same attachment or as the body of the email).

## Preparing to Write Your Cover Letter (*See also the outline for a cover letter on page 2.*)

- **Thoroughly review the position description and take note of top qualifications and preferred ones.** (If there are terms you don't understand, check reputable sources online or ask the Career Development Office.)
- **Make a list of times when you gained/demonstrated these qualifications** in courses, clubs, internships, etc.
- **Visit the organization’s website** to better understand their goals, products/services, staffing structure, etc.

## Don'ts:

- Don't mention any experience you feel you are lacking.
- Avoid overused phrases/words like “passion”, “at your earliest convenience” or “I desire to join your team.”
- Avoid exclamation marks, humor, slang, exaggeration, abbreviations or smiley faces.

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Month Day, Year (for example: May 3, 2019)

Dr./Mr./Ms. First and Last Name

Title

Company/Organization Name

Organization Street Address

City, ST Zip Code

Dear Dr./Mr./Ms. Last name, or Dear Hiring Manager, or Dear Selection Committee,

Introductory Paragraph #1: (3-4 sentences)

- State **Position or Opportunity** you are applying for and how you learned of it (e.g. Professor \_\_\_\_\_, former intern, Agnes Scott jobs board, etc.)
  - Note: Marketing, communications and writing positions often value a creative, but still relevant, opening. For example, if the role is to be part of a sales team, the applicant might open with something about their competitive spirit or history in team sports.
- Briefly state **why** you are interested in this position.
- **State top 2-3 reasons you are a good fit, based on the requirements** for the position/opportunity (your **Topic Sentence**)

Supporting Paragraph #2: (5-6 sentences)

- Support your topic sentence by highlighting 2-3 of your best examples of academic, campus/service or internship/work experience; explain how they relate to the main requirements of position to which you are applying.
- Also describe any skills, knowledge or experience you have that relates to the employer's preferred qualification(s) for the position.
  - Note: Elaborate on, as opposed to repeat, details from your resume.

Closing paragraph #3: (3-4 sentences)

- Restate your interest in the position.
  - Note: It is most effective to state a reason that is beneficial to both parties. For example, instead of "I believe this job will be good experience for my application for graduate school", you could say "I am interested in further developing my experience in applied math."
- Indicate your resume is attached for their review (and any other materials they require.)
- Encourage them to reach out to you with questions or to arrange an interview.
- Express thanks for their consideration.

Sincerely,

Your First and Last Name