



UNIVERSITY OF  
CHARLESTON

CENTER FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT



# WRITING COVER LETTERS

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*The cover letter is one of the most misunderstood parts of the job application process. What is a cover letter? Do I need one? Can I use the same cover letter for all my applications? How long should it be? Cover letters can be overwhelming because there is no standard format, just as there is no standard resume format. But, a well-written cover letter can give you an immediate advantage in your job search. Most applicants don't take the time to write one, so you can gain a leg up by including one with your resume and application.*

## PURPOSE OF THE COVER LETTER

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Since you're almost certainly sending a resume to the employer, why take the extra time to compose a cover letter? The resume is, after all, a snapshot of your education and experience. The problem is that snapshots don't tell the whole story. Resumes are written using a technique called gapping, where the writer uses short, action-oriented statements and phrases<sup>1</sup>. On resumes, the writer is assumed to be the subject of the sentence, so there is no need to start statements with "I" or "My." Because of that, resumes do not do a very good job of demonstrating one's written communication skills. Cover letters solve that problem since they are written in full-sentence prose<sup>2</sup>.

Cover letters allow job applicants to explain *why* they are solid candidates for the desired job. You can connect specific experiences from your past with the job for which you are applying. You can also be more personal in a cover letter than a resume. Resumes are intentionally concise and formal (in terms of the information presented). Cover letters, while still professional in nature, allow job applicants to be more conversational.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/641/1/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-write-a-cover-letter-31-tips-you-need-to-know>

## CONTENT

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Cover letters should address three basic things:

1. How you found out about the job
  2. Why you are a great candidate for the particular job
  3. A basic knowledge of the company
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### Why does it matter how you found out about the job opening?

First of all, it's an easy way to open the letter. It also provides some instant rapport. For example, you might open your letter like this:

*"I came across the opening for an Office Administrator on the University of Charleston's Handshake job board and would like to apply for the position."*

The fact that you found the job on Handshake indicates that you're either a student or alum or the University of Charleston, which was apparently a group that the hiring manager was trying to target.

If you know someone at the company, you already have a foot in the door. Call that person and ask if you can mention them on the cover letter. You can then open your letter like this:

*"In a recent conversation with John Doe, an engineer with your firm, he informed me about the Office Administrator position. I am very interested in the opportunity and would like to apply."*

The person who receives your letter may or may not know John Doe, but companies usually place a high value on employee referrals. If you know John Doe to be a reliable employee, the company will probably want more people like John at their firm.

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**The opportunity to tell the hiring manager why you are the right candidate is the most important purpose of the cover letter.**

Not only can you link your skills and experience to the duties of the job, you can explain why you want to work at the organization. Employers want employees who want to work for them. Maybe the

employer is located in a city where you've always wanted to live. Maybe the organization is recognized as one of the best companies in their industry. Whatever the reason, let them know why you want to work there.

When you are communicating your skills and experience, you don't want to regurgitate your resume<sup>3</sup>, but you do want to point out a few of your best qualities and link those to the job. Using our previous example, if you are applying to an office administration position, you may need to work with spreadsheets and databases. If you are Microsoft Excel certified, you should list that as a reason why you would be good for the job. If you worked in a previous job that required you to learn an Oracle or SAP database management system, briefly describe that experience.

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### **Finally, you can use your cover letter to demonstrate a basic knowledge of the organization and its purpose.**

Hiring managers want candidates who have taken the time to learn about the company before applying. If you don't care enough about the organization to find out what it makes or who it serves, you won't be able to convince a hiring manager that you really want to work for them. You can demonstrate some knowledge of the company when you talk about why you want to work there. You may also want to add a few sentences in which you compliment the company for recent achievements. If the organization has earned a special certification or recognition, such as a Malcom Baldrige Quality Award or recognition on the Forbes "Best Places to Work" list, you may want to say something like this:

*"It would be an honor to work for a company like yours with the distinction of being a Malcom Baldrige National Quality Award winner."*

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-write-a-cover-letter-31-tips-you-need-to-know>

## FORMAT

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Cover letters should take the form of a typical business letter. You should begin with your address, followed by the date, the recipient's address, and the salutation<sup>4</sup>. When possible, you should identify a specific person to whom you can send the letter. If you're lucky, the job posting will list the recruiter's name. If it doesn't, you may have to do some investigative work. Smaller companies often list their entire staff directory online, and from there you can find the person who is most likely to review your application. You can also use LinkedIn to find a company's employees.

In larger organizations that utilize automated hiring systems, you may not be able to identify a recruiter or hiring manager. In that case, address your letter to a specific department<sup>5</sup>. For example, if you're applying to a junior accountant position, begin with "Dear Accounting Department..." It isn't nearly as good as finding a specific individual to whom you can send your letter, but it's better than using "To whom it may concern."

Keep in mind that when you send your letter, you will most likely attach your letter to an email or upload it to an automated application system. In this day and time, email is the preferred method of contact for most professionals. Occasionally, you may need to send a physical letter, but only if you cannot find a suitable email address or if the application instructions specifically ask that you mail in your application materials.

Once you've figured out who should receive your cover letter, you can begin writing. Like any other letter, you should begin with an introduction, followed by the body, and ending with a conclusion. Cover letters should be brief, so your introduction may only be a sentence or two. The same goes for your conclusion. In the body of the letter, let the reader know why you are a good candidate for the job. Highlight some specific skills and experiences as discussed in the previous section.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/527/01/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.themuse.com/advice/how-to-write-a-cover-letter-31-tips-you-need-to-know>

Jane Doe  
123 Career Drive  
Charleston, WV 25304

June 7th, 2018

John Recruiter  
ABC Corporation  
7575 Industrial Drive  
South Charleston, WV 25064

Dear Mr. Recruiter,

I would like to apply for the position of Marketing Associate with ABC Corporation. I heard about the position from **Mark Smith**, who works as an accountant with ABC Corp. For several years, my goal has been to work in marketing for a manufacturer. I recently completed an internship with XYZ Corporation where I assisted the market research and new product development teams.

Last month, I graduated from the University of Charleston with a degree in Business Administration. At UC, I participated in the West Virginia Collegiate State Business Plan competition and the I-3 Innovation Showcase. My business plan for a digital advertising agency earned 3<sup>rd</sup> place honors in the state competition and 1<sup>st</sup> place in the Innovation Showcase. I was also a three-year starting setter on the women's volleyball team at UC where I honed my leadership skills and learned how to contribute to an effective team.

It would be a true honor to work for ABC Corp. The products made by ABC possess some of the highest brand-recognition ratings in the industry. I look forward to the opportunity of being part of such a superb marketing department. I hope to hear from you soon regarding an interview. You can reach me at 304-555-5555 or janedoe@ucwv.edu.

Sincerely,  
Jane Doe

## A sample cover letter is included for your reference.

Be sure to check out the Resume Center on the UC portal for more cover letter templates and examples.

*The letter is addressed to a specific person, which is more personal and demonstrates that Jane took time to find the recruiter/hiring manager.*

*Jane opens her letter by mentioning a current employee's name, which helps to build rapport.*

*Following the introduction, Jane states why she is interested and highlights her skills and experience that make her a good candidate.*

*Jane is complimentary of ABC Corp. and demonstrates knowledge of the company.*



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