

# **How to write a successful cover letter**

**Rose Filazzola**

# Index

- Why do you need a cover letter?
- How to present a cover letter
- What to include in your cover letter
- Structure for a covering letter
- E-mailed letters
- How should you start your cover letter? Survey
- How not to write a cover letter
- What employers expect in a cover letter
- Required cover letter
- Create a cover letter template
- Personalize your cover letter
- Review cover letter samples
- Summary
- Cover letter templates

## How to write a successful cover letter

*Before starting to write your cover letter, find a quiet place to think and write.....*

### Why do you need a cover letter?

**The cover letter is vital to your CV.** This is why it is the first page and not an addition. "Please find enclosed my CV" won't get you very far.

Your cover letter **demonstrates your writing style** better than your CV (which is usually more brief and factual).

**The cover letter gives information which you cannot include in your CV.** It points out to the employer the information showing that you have the qualities the job calls for, and makes a statement about yourself and your suitability for the job. It should give the personal touch that your CV will intrinsically lack.

### How to present a cover letter.

- **Plain white photocopier paper is fine.** It's OK to print your letter on expensive cream or pale blue paper, but content and layout are **far more important!** Use the same colour for your CV. Don't use lined paper or paper with punched holes!
- **If emailed** put your cover letter in the body of the email. If you attach it with nothing in the email body it may be misidentified as spam.
- **Don't make the employer work to read your letter!** Keep it clear, concise and to the point.
- **Try not to go over one side of A4:** if it does, you are writing an essay instead!

### What to Include in Your Cover Letter

- **The content of your cover letter should be brief and structured,** avoid lengthy repetition of information covered in your CV. (Unlike a CV, it is acceptable to write a cover letter in the first person.)
- **Use your own words** not formal long-winded clichés.
- **Action verbs** can help to make it sound better.
- **Spell-check** and then double-check your spelling and grammar. Spell checkers won't pick up *form* instead of *from* or *sex* instead of *six*!
- **Answer the question "Why should I see you?"**
- **Your letter should address the relevant contact** whose name often appears in the job advert. **Make the person who reads it feel special:** that it is addressed to them personally and not one of fifty identical letters you are sending out without thought or care. Avoid Sir or Madam if possible.
- **If you are replying to an advert,** say so. Mention job title, any reference number and where and when you saw it.
- **Tell the potential employer a little about themselves** to demonstrate you have properly read the advert and that you have done some research into the organisation. Also, state why you are interested in them as an employer.
- **You might include your understanding of the work/knowledge of the company,** and how you fit the criteria required. "I have a real interest in working as a ...." will not do: you must say why you decided to pursue this career, what first brought it to your attention.

- **Relate your skills to the job.** Show the employer that you have obtained the communicating, teamworking, problem solving and leadership or other skills that are appropriate for the job. Highlight your transferable skills, achievements and versatility; what you can contribute and what makes you different. Mention personality traits relevant to the role applied for, taking care not to appear too subjective. **You need to succinctly emphasize why an employer may want to meet and employ you.**
- **Say when you're available to start work** (and end, if it's a placement): be as flexible as possible.
- **Try to find the name of the person to write to.** Research by Forum3Agency found that **those who included a letter with their CV were 10% more likely to receive a reply** and those who addressed the cover letter and envelope to the correct named person were 15% more likely to receive a letter of acknowledgement and 5% more likely to gain an interview. They also found that 60% of CVs are mailed to the wrong person, with the managing director being the main beneficiary of the unsolicited mail.
- A good idea is **to list the competencies** that the job advertisement are looking for, and outline how **you fulfill those competencies**.
- **Ensure that your CV cover letter flows freely** however, and does not slavishly match every point on the job description. The reader should be left with an overall impression that you are a potentially valuable addition to the workforce.
- **Negative information of any sort should be avoided** in your cover letter as well as CV.
- **Close your letter with a polite expression of interest** in further dialogue with the recruiter. Do mention that you would like the opportunity to discuss your suitability further at an interview and that you await a response in due course.
- **Ensure your letter is neatly and clearly presented** with no grammatical or spelling errors.
- **Email cover letters should be written in a common font** with standard formatting and should emulate a handwritten letter in terms of style.

### Structure for a cover letter:

#### First Paragraph

- **State the job you're applying for.**
- **Where you found out about it** (advert in The Guardian newspaper etc. - organisations like to know which of their advertising sources are being successful)
- **When you're available to start work** (and end if it's a placement)

#### Second Paragraph

- **Why you're interested** in that type of work
- **Why the company attracts you** (if it's a small company say you prefer to work for a small friendly organisation!)

#### Third Paragraph

- **Summarise your strengths** and how they might be an advantage to the organisation.
- **Relate your skills to the competencies required in the job.**

#### Last Paragraph

- Mention any **dates that you won't be available for interview**
- **Thank the employers** and say you look forward to hearing from them soon.

N.B. If you start with a name (e.g. "Dear Mr Bloggs") you should end with "*Yours sincerely*". If you start with "Dear Sir or Madam" you should end with "*Yours faithfully*".

## Emailed letters

The same information as the mailed cover letter should be included in the e-mailed letter.

Your cover letter should be **the** main e-mail and the CV should be sent as an attachment.

It is wise to format it as plain text so that it can be read by any email reader.

Remember that emails are not as easy to read as letters. **Stick to simple text with short paragraphs and plenty of spacing.** Break messages into points and make each one a new paragraph with a full line gap between paragraphs. DON'T "SHOUT" (DON'T WRITE IN CAPITAL LETTERS!) **Your CV is then sent as an attachment.** Say you will send a printed CV if required.

If you don't know the name of the person you are writing to, it's probably best to use the formal *Dear Sir or Madam* and to sign off *Yours Sincerely* or *Yours Faithfully* (see above).

If they have already emailed you, reply back in the same style, therefore, if they have signed their email "Jenny", write *Dear Jenny*, but if they have signed it "Ms Smith", write *Dear Ms Smith*.

If they have emailed you and addressed you *Hi Dave*, then it's OK to reply *Hi Jenny*.

Also mirror the way they sign off, if they use "*regards*", "*best wishes*", then it's safe to do the same.

## How should you start your cover letter? Survey of cover letter opening lines

Here are the most common opening lines from a sample of cover letters by University of Kent students (numbers of occurrences in brackets)

- I have just completed my final year at the University of (3)
- I am a final year law student at the University of (2)
- As a law undergraduate at the University of Kent I am looking for
- Currently I am pursuing a degree in .... at the University of
- My name is .... and I am a final year student at the (4)
- My name is .... and I am writing in response to your advertisement
- I am writing to apply for the post of .... in your company (5)
- I am writing in response to your advertisement in/for (3)
- I am writing to enquire if you have any vacancies for ....
- I was very interested to read your advertisement for
- Further to your advertisement in .....,
- I should like to apply for
- With reference to your vacancy for a ....
- I enclose my CV for consideration for the post of
- Please find enclosed my application for the post of (3)
- As you will see from my CV
- I am seeking a placement within a
- I am currently looking for an entry-level post in
- I am very keen to work for .... because of your reputation for

- Your company has an excellent reputation for the training of graduates ...

### **How not to write a cover letter:**

- Being a Virgoan, my sense of assertiveness and resilience has prompted me to continue with my ambitions to be a solicitor in a major city law firm...
- Up until a little while ago I used to compete in British-Eventing competitions on my horse, from which I got a real kick.
- Am currently reading Robbie Williams' thought-provoking autobiography.
- Like one of your coffees, I am designed to be opened, savoured and enjoyed. (in application to Nestle)
- I am someone who knows my own destiny, but I have no definite long term plans
- Here are my qualifications for you to overlook.
- If called to interview I would like to discuss the salary, pensions and sickness benefits
- I have excellent memory skills, good analytical skills, excellent memory skills.
- Wholly responsible for two (2) failed financial institutions.
- I was working for my mother until she decided to move.
- Spelt his own name wrongly: noticeable as he'd included it at both the top and the bottom of his cover letter.
- Letters that are shorter than tweets.
- Letter that just said "Have a nice day." or, that said "Please view my resume."

### **What Employers Expect in a Cover Letter**

Employers expect cover letters and they want more than just a basic cover letter.

- Tailored skills from the job description - 33%
- Clarity (specifying job applied to) - 26%
- Details from CV - 20%
- Your (personal) value - 19%

Employers expect personalized cover letters that show them why you are a strong fit for the position and a valuable candidate worth taking the time to interview.

It can be hard to justify taking the time to write a customized cover letter, especially when you don't hear back from employers after sending out, in some cases, hundreds of cover letters and CVs.

It's tough when you put effort into applying - over and over again - and your applications get lost in the "black hole" of the Internet. However, you must do everything possible to make sure that you get an interview, to get closer to the job you are seeking.

### **Required Cover Letters**

If an employer requests a cover letter, you need to send one - a real cover letter, not a sentence or two. It is in your best interest to send one even if it's not a requirement.

### **Create a Cover Letter Template**

One way to make cover letter writing a little easier is to start with a cover letter template, customize it to include some basic information about your skills and experience. Save your cover letter as a Word document with a file name that's easy to recognize i.e. coverlettertemplate.doc.

## Personalize Your Cover Letter

Each time you apply for a job, open your cover letter template document and create a new version of your cover letter. Personalize what is now your cover letter template to fit the job requirements of the positions you apply for.

Edit the contact information section to include the information for the new employer. Edit the salutation with the new hiring manager's name, if you have it. Edit the first paragraph of your letter to reflect the job you're applying for and where you found the posting.

Personalize the body of the cover letter and relate your skills to the job description. Your final paragraph, closing and signature won't need to be changed.

Be sure to save your cover letter with a new file name so that you will have a copy of each cover letter you send to employers.

Having a template ready will be easier than starting from scratch and it won't take long to write a tailored cover letter and you will make a much better impression than if you simply say here is my CV.

## Review Cover Letter Samples

If you are not sure what to write, consult the Internet to get ideas for writing cover letters that make the best impression.

### Summary

- 1. No more than one side A4** – If longer, it becomes an essay, not a business letter!
- 2. State the job you are applying for and where you found out about it.** Large organisations may have many different vacancies at one time.
- 3. Say why you are interested in the job and the employing organization.**
- 4. Spell and grammar check it, VERY CAREFULLY!** A single spelling mistake could rule you out.
- 5. Make it personal** to the job and employer. Do careful research to find out what make them special.
- 7. Mention your USP (Unique Selling Points).** The skills and attributes that make you stand out from other candidates.
- 8. Relate your skills to the job.**
- 9. Keep copies** of all letters, applications forms, and CVs sent, and records of telephone calls and names of those you spoke to.

## **Sample. Cover Letter**

### **Contact Information**

The first section of your cover letter should include information on how the employer can contact you. If you have contact information for the employer, include that. Otherwise, just list your information.

### **Your Contact Information**

Your Name  
Your Address  
Your City, Postal Code  
Your Phone Number  
Your Email Address

Date

### **Employer Contact Information**

Name  
Title  
Company  
Address  
City, State, Zip Code

### **Salutation**

Dear Mr./Ms. Last Name:

### **Body of Cover Letter**

The body of your cover letter lets the employer know what position you are applying for, why the employer should select you for an interview, and how you will follow-up.

#### **First Paragraph:**

The first paragraph of your letter should include information on why you are writing. Mention the position you are applying for. Include the name of a mutual contact, if you have one. Be clear and concise regarding your request. Convince the reader that they should grant the interview or appointment you requested in the first paragraph.

#### **Middle Paragraphs:**

The next section of your cover letter should describe what you have to offer the employer. Make strong connections between your abilities and their needs. Mention specifically how your skills and experience match the job you are applying for. Remember, you are interpreting your CV, not repeating it. Try to support each statement you make with a piece of evidence. Use several shorter paragraphs or bullets rather than one large block of text.

#### **Final Paragraph:**

Conclude your cover letter by thanking the employer for considering you for the position. Include information on how you will follow-up. State that you will do so and indicate when (one week's time is typical). You may want to reduce the time between sending out your resume and follow up if you fax or e-mail it.

### **Complimentary Close:**

Respectfully yours,

#### **Signature:**

Handwritten Signature (for a mailed letter)

Typed Signature